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Compiled and distributed by Michael C Jennings (ABBA Co-ordinator)

for contributors to the Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Arabia

## First Breeding of Woodchat Shrike in Arabia by Khalid Al-Nasrallah

The woodchat shrike *Lanius senator* is a fairly common migrant through Kuwait in both spring and autumn, and there are a few winter records. The nearest known breeding area to Kuwait is Syria. In March 2004 a male and female were seen repeatedly at Tulha (NB36), in an isolated group of acacia, *Prosopis* and *Zizyphus* trees in the Sabah al-Ahmed al-Sabah Natural Reserve (formerly the National Park). Their continued presence was not considered unusual at first, because the drinking pool there allows migrants of many species to remain and feed.

On 25 March I discovered and photographed an unusual empty nest on a branch of an acacia tree. It was situated about two metres above the ground and was in the form of a well-built bowl made of shoots of small herbs. It was lined with the cottony seed-heads of a plant. On 29 March it was found to contain two eggs, which were generally off-white with brownish and greyish spots arranged mostly around the widest diameter. After moving away, I saw a female woodchat approach and settle on the nest. There was a male perched nearby. Both birds and the nest were photographed. The nest site was filmed by a remote video camera for a few days, with the male bringing food to the female, insects of various types mainly beetles, passing across the nest several times and singing nearby. Only the female brooded the eggs, which increased to four on 1 April.

There were severe gusts of wind in Kuwait around this time and on 5 April the branch, nest and eggs were discovered blown down on the ground, being clearly abandoned by the birds. Of the six eggs which the nest contained, two were broken. The nest and unbroken eggs were collected and preserved. The pair of shrikes remained for some days but did not attempt to build a new nest.

Khalid al-Nasrallah, KEPS, PO Box 1896, Safat, 13019, Kuwait.



## ABBA Progress in 2004

In common with all great projects the ABBA project creeps inexorably forward but sometimes, it seems, at a slower rate. By the end of 2004 the first draft of all the introductory chapters had been written along with some 235 species accounts (of 276 breeding birds), and all the remaining species accounts are in various stages of preparation, this leaves the various appendices as the main section now outstanding. Also during 2004 great progress was made in resolving several data translation issues to improve the quality of data on the database and to make map preparation more flexible, the maps easier to interpret and better reflect the breeding situation of each bird. One problem remaining

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الهيئة الوطنية لحماية الحياة الفطرية  
وإنماها،  
ص ب ١١٦٨١، الرياض،  
المملكة العربية السعودية

unresolved is the search for an up to date digital map of the Arabian peninsula. If any reader has knowledge of a good digital map of Arabia showing at least coastlines and up to date borders could they please provide details to me.

One would have thought that with 20 years of atlassing activity in Arabia the number of new breeding birds discovered each year would have reduced to just a trickle but this year we have another five species reported as breeding for the first time. Those like woodchat shrike *Lanius senator* (page 1) might have been expected for years but bay-backed shrike *Lanius vittatus* (page 28) was a complete surprise. Pheasant-tailed jacanas *Hydrophasianus chirurgus* (page 2) have, it seems, been breeding for years down in Dhofar, it is just that a report had not been made to ABBA. Another surprise is the red-knobbed coot *Fulica cristata* (see al Warsen lake page 18) which has bred in the UAE. The circumstances of its breeding are a little mysterious and it may yet prove to have only hybridised with the common coot *Fulica atra* but all the same it shows that if the conditions are right for this Arabian vagrant it can breed. Is Egyptian nightjar *Caprimulgus aegyptius* the next breeding bird waiting to be discovered? (page 11). The importance of following up out-of-season sightings of migrants acting suspiciously is underlined by the discoveries of the two new breeding shrikes mentioned above. Several migrant warblers are also potential breeding birds in Arabia and therefore the sighting in June this year of a singing barred warbler *Sylvia nisoria*, in close association with a female (page 11) are worthy of report.

The continuous onslaught of new exotics to Arabia continues with red bishop *Euplectes orix* being added as a breeding bird by default, on the basis that it has been present in the southern Arabian Gulf for years although no one has actually proved that it breeds yet. This is probably down to the apathy that most observers extend towards exotics but it is a species that someone in the UAE could make a determined search for during the next 12 months to prove breeding. There are several other exotics around that probably breed but have never been proved to do so, through a similar lack of interest! We should be interested as the next exotic to colonise Arabia could be as unwelcome as the house crow *Corvus splendens* on Socotra or the European starling *Sturnus vulgaris* in the United States.

This issue contains several requests for information on wing-tagged and colour ringed birds, some of these birds have already turned up in Arabia and everyone is asked to keep an eye open for them and pass on the details of these requests to others. ABBA continues to keep a file on the movement of marked birds from, to, and within Arabia, and would welcome copy details of any sightings.

Finally it is with much regret that I learnt of the death of three ABBA supporters during 2004. In February Professor Charles Pilcher, who has been in Kuwait for many years and has published a stream of relevant papers on Kuwait birds since the early 1980's, including several in *Phoenix*, died in February. At the time of his death he was working on a Kuwait checklist which hopefully will be taken up and completed by others. Ian Philip who was active in the Eastern Province up to 2003 died in March.

Arthur Stagg, an old friend from pre ABBA days died in April. Over the years Arthur prepared a series of privately published checklist of regions of Saudi Arabia which have been very valuable references to ABBA and to local birders. I remember Arthur best from our days together in Saudi Arabia in the mid 1970's. He has been a stalwart supporter of ABBA from its inception, with small cash donations in the early days, as a contributor of many records from the four corners of Saudi Arabia and as a species account author for the final atlas.

Michael Jennings

## Pheasant-tailed Jacana - a 'new' breeding bird for Arabia

The pheasant-tailed jacana *Hydrophasianus chirurgus* occurs regularly in winter in the wetlands of southern Oman and less frequently elsewhere in Oman. There are two records from Yemen, as far west as al Qutay on the Red Sea Tihama, two from Socotra and one south of Riyadh, central Arabia. It is unknown in Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar and the UAE. No confirmed breeding records had been reported to ABBA but the sixth edition of the Oman Bird List (Eriksen, et. al. 2003) contained a confirmed breeding record of adults and juveniles seen in Wadi Darbat (UA11), Dhofar in August 1997. Further enquiries have revealed details of another breeding record near to Wadi Darbat at Khor Rouri (UA11) by Steve Tibbett. Steve has written as follows:

"In June 1993 or 1994, the water level at Khor Rouri was higher than usual for the time of year and the whole of the freshwater end of the khor was covered in floating weed. This appears to be an unusual event and has not been recorded before or since. I noticed a breeding plumaged Pheasant-tailed Jacana feeding along the shore line of the khor and also another, which appeared to be sat in the middle of the floating weed. After a few minutes the sitting bird flew across to join the other bird on the shore. There seemed to be a flat pad of weed where the bird had been sitting which could have been a nest and so I climbed up a nearby cliff to gain a better view. At 200 yards there looked to be two eggs in a nest. After about 10 minutes a bird flew over to near the nest, walked to it and sat down on the eggs. From time to time it would stretch out its neck to pull bits of weed over the nest edge. The bird was still sitting on the eggs when I left the site."

This species breeds from Pakistan eastwards to SE China and Taiwan and southwards to Indonesia. The northern and higher altitude populations are partially migratory, wintering mainly southwards with a few reaching southern Arabia. In both breeding and wintering range it inhabits freshwater sites, feeding in areas of floating or emergent surface vegetation. It has an unusual breeding regime, it is polyandrous with one female (continued on page 4)

The first Arabian breeding of the woodchat shrike *Lanius senator* occurred in the Sabah al-Almed al-Sabah Natural Reserve, Kuwait. Eggs were laid in this nest in an acacia bush in late March 2004 but the nest was blown down in severe gusts of wind. See report page 1. (Photo: Khalid Al-Nasrallah).

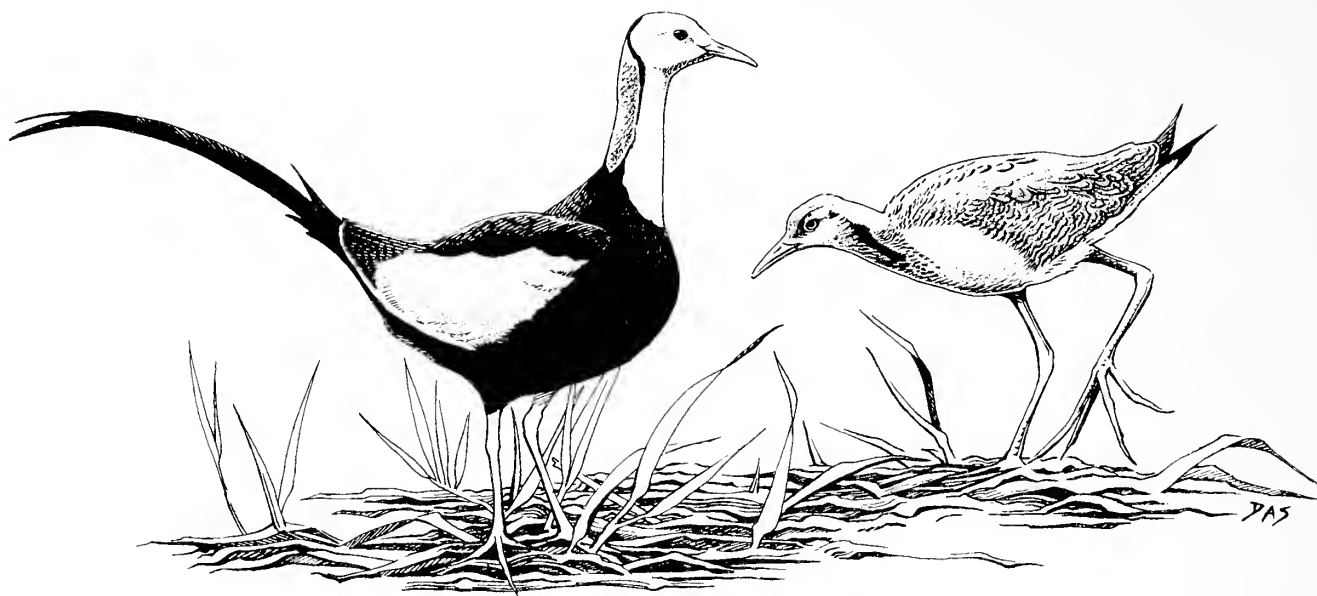


Red-wattled plovers *Hoplopterus indicus* have been slowly expanding their range within eastern Arabia in recent years. This picture shows a bird with wet belly feathers possibly dunked in water nearby to cool the eggs. (Photo: Mohammed Arfau Asif).



The Madagasean red fody *Foudia madagascariensis* is an exotic breeding ferally on Bahrain. It has also been introduced to various other islands in the Indian and Atlantic Oceans. No details are available yet of its breeding biology on Bahrain. (Photo: Howard King).





defending three or more males, laying clutches for each. The males are solely responsible for making nests, incubation and care of young. The nest is a pad of vegetable matter on floating vegetation. The males have been recorded moving eggs to other nest sites.

In Arabia this jacana is primarily a regular winter visitor (November to May) in small numbers to still, fresh or brackish, Dhofar khors. Once over 50 were recorded at Khor Rouri in February but this was exceptional. The majority appear to return eastwards to the Indian region in the summer months, as there are very few records from Dhofar at this time. It seems from Steve Tibbett's observation that habitat has to be just right for the few that over-summer to be tempted to breed.

**Reference:** • Eriksen, J, D E Sargeant and R Victor. 2003. *Oman Bird List, Edition 6*, Centre for Environmental Studies and Research Sultan Qaboos University.

## Red Bishop - New breeding exotic?

The southern red bishop *Euplectes orix* is a native of the southern part of Africa. It has been recorded as an exotic in various parts of the UAE since 1988. Records are almost all from the Dubai and Sharjah area (VA27), notably Dubai fish farm and Safa park. There is one September record from Ruwais (SB25) in western Abu Dhabi. Since 2001 one or two have been reported from Qurm park (YB24) near Muscat, Oman. They have been recorded throughout the year and are thought to be resident where they occur. Song has been recorded in June and they have been reported as 'confirmed breeding' with nests built (September) and adults seen entering and leaving nests (April). It was once reported as having 'bred successfully' (July) and there is one undated record of recently fledged young but there appears to be no detail for any of these breeding observations. They probably do breed but there remains the possibility that nests and some birds near nests have been confused with one or other

of the several other exotic weavers now recorded in eastern Arabia, especially near Dubai. Of course the presence of nests for any weaver is not in itself evidence for breeding, as weavers seem to make nests all the time regardless of whether or not they intend to breed.

In the southern third of Africa this species is found in grasslands and cultivation, typically near water. They eat mainly seeds but also take a range of insects and other invertebrates. They nest in small groups or larger colonies in reedbeds. The nest is constructed of reeds or grasses, is oval in shape, with a side entrance under a 'porch'.

## Recent Reports

The following are a selection of some interesting, unexpected or unusual records of Arabian breeding birds (or potential breeders) received during the last year. Records are from 2004 unless noted otherwise. Not all these records have been verified and some may not yet have been accepted by local recorders. (Note that recent reports for eastern Yemen and Kuwait are dealt with in separate articles on pages 20 and 24).

**Great-crested grebe *Podiceps cristatus*** An adult was present at the 'Prison pools' (RA27), Qatar, 17 April 2003 and July (MCJ/Jamie Buchan) and a possible juvenile at the same site, 12 May 2003 (John Norton). They attempted to breed again in Dhahran (QA29) this year but were unsuccessful (Graham Lobley).

**Socotra cormorant *Phalacrocorax nigrogularis*** The provision total breeding on Hawar (QB28) in 2003 was 30,724 pairs, that is an increase on the previous year but this probably reflects movement between Gulf of Salwa colonies. Possible instances of cannibalism by juveniles on chicks reported. (Howard King)

**Reef heron *Egretta gularis*** Two mainland colonies (9 and 32 pairs) found in mangroves near Dammam (QA29), June, (BS Meadows).

**Lesser flamingo *Phoenicopterus minor*** Several Hodeidah marsh (IB06), 23 October (David Stanton). There have not been many records in Arabia in the last few years. This species has attempted to breed in the past.

**Short-toed eagle *Circaetus gallicus*** A pair in aerial grappling display, northern UAE (WA28), 4 April 2003 (Barbara Couldrey).

**Shikra *Accipiter badius*** Large young noted in a nest in the Dubai area (VA27) and at least three pairs located there June (David le Mesurier).

**Chukar *Alectoris chukar*** Seven Jebel Hafit (VA25), 7 December 2003, presumed to have been introduced recently to the site (Simon Aspinall).

**Grey francolin *Fringilla monticola*** Range expansion in the Jubail area to Sabkhat al Fasl (PA31) 20 February (Brian Meadows). Also breeding this year on the main Hawar island (QB28), Bahrain (Howard King)

**Purple gallinule *Porphyrio porphyrio*** Up to six at Sabkhat al Fasl (PA31) in July (Brian Meadows).

**Arabian bustard *Ardeotis arabs*** One in a sorghum field near Bajil (JA06), 21 October (David Stanton).

**Sandwich tern *Sterna sandvicensis*** One or two at a colony of lesser crested terns *S. bengalensis* on Bahrain causeway (QA29), 24 June (Brian Meadows).

**Little tern *Sterna albifrons*** One possible at the 'Prison pools' (RA27) Qatar, 12 June 2003 (John Norton) A late record in suitable breeding habitat.

**Ring-necked parakeet *Psittacula krameri*** One at 2150 m on the Saiq plateau (XB23), Oman, 25 December 2003 (Gary Feulner).

**Little owl *Athene noctua*** Several pairs reported from north west of the Qatar peninsula (RB28), (M A Tayab).

**Socotra cisticola *Cisticola haesitata*** A population of at least 1000 individuals found on the extreme west of Socotra island (TA02) in March greatly increases the known population of this species (Richard Porter).

**Fan-tailed warbler *Cisticola juncidis*** Display flight, in the Jebel Bura area (JA06), Yemen, 21 October (David Stanton)

**Basra reed warbler *Acrocephalus griseldis*** At least two Dhahran (QA29) 15 July, also several in May. (Graham Lobley)

**Sykes' warbler *Hippolais rama*** A paper in *Ibis*, the journal of

the British Ornithologist Union, entitled *The identity of some Hippolais specimens from Eritrea and the United Arab Emirates examined by mtDNA analysis: a record of Sykes' Warbler H. rama in Africa* (by D J Pearson, J S Ash, & S Bensch. *Ibis* (2004)146:683-684) determines that birds collected in Ras al Khaimah and Khor Kalba, UAE, are the same species as one trapped in coastal Eritrea. They are all Sykes' warbler *H. rama*. This year four or five pairs were reported from Khor Kalba (WA27) in February (Vegard Bunes). (Editors Note: Currently, for the purposes of ABBA data collection, Sykes' warbler *H. rama* is included with booted warbler *H. caligata*. However the two species may be split for the final atlas).

**Golden oriole *Oriolus oriolus*** Two males calling Dhahran (QA29) late April and up to six present until 20 May (Graham Lobley).

**Red-backed shrike *Lanius collurio*** Pair at Sabah al Salem (OA35), Kuwait, 6 June (G Gregory).

**House crow *Corvus splendens*** A nest in Jeddah (FA20) constructed entirely of wire coat hangers (Newspaper cutting with photos submitted by Simon Aspinall).

**House sparrow *Passer domesticus*** Forty pairs now resident at Thumrait airbase (UA12) domestic area (Ian Brown). The species has only been known in Dhofar in recent years but has not yet colonised the coastal plain.

**Village weaver *Ploceus cucullatus*** Singing male, 29 July 2003 and a nest under construction, 5 August 2003, Abu Dhabi (UA25), (Simon Aspinall).

## The Mysterious status of Gulf Pallid Swifts by Simon Aspinall

The pallid swift *Apus pallidus* is a migrant breeder to much of Arabia, from Kuwait to the southern Arabian Gulf, and patchily across Arabia to the central Red Sea. It is also a migrant through many areas of the peninsula, particularly the southern Gulf, presumably to and from its Asian breeding grounds. The picture seems relatively straightforward, yet there is mounting evidence that all is not quite what it seems in the Gulf. Deciphering exactly what is going on is proving to be a complex matter and clearly we don't yet have all the answers.

In coastal districts of the southern Gulf in the UAE, most adults return to breeding districts, if not immediately to nesting sites, in late October or November/December (Dubai and northern emirates), or from late November to January (Abu Dhabi). Natural nest sites, on the other hand, are almost exclusively occupied only from late March or April. The latter includes just a few inland sites where, interestingly, manmade sites are not known to be used frequently, if at all. Birds are invariably absent from the UAE after breeding, July to September or later, although one or two individuals can still sometimes be seen during this period.

The young fledge from manmade sites in March or April (Dubai), or in April or May (Abu Dhabi), whereas natural sites see young leaving the nest only in June or July. Throughout the Batinah coast of Oman breeding is at much the same time or slightly ahead of that reported for Dubai and, as in UAE, the entire population of northern Oman disappears post-fledging, late May to October inclusive (Eriksen et al. 2003).

The migration pattern of this species is unresolved. Birds may migrate post-breeding to Dhofar, southern Oman and neighbouring parts of Yemen, i.e. remaining in the Arabian peninsula, or possibly enter Africa, though none of this is proven. Why in any case would a swift go to Africa for the northern summer? In coastal Dhofar the local swift, the identity of which remains undetermined, would be just over mid-way through its breeding season at this time, not that this should preclude the wholesale arrival of a population of pallid swifts over the then monsoon-watered hills with an abundance of aerial food likely to be available.

If southern Gulf breeding birds do not head to Dhofar post-breeding, a mere 1200 km distant, a plausible alternative may be for birds to migrate north a short distance to breed again in south-west Asia. There is certainly sufficient time between June and September for this to take place. Thereafter birds would still be able return to the Gulf once again in late October or November, which is when a large-scale reappearance is actually noted. For reasons which are unclear, the annual return to Abu Dhabi, particularly to coastal districts, post-dates that to the northern emirates by some four to eight weeks, a considerable margin.

The energetics of an onward migration, even a short distance one, and then breeding for a second time in a year may preclude this possibility. The onset of moult of the adults' remiges is at least partial in the later stages of nesting and post-fledging of their young, and is presumably suspended for whatever movement they then undergo. If the southern Gulf population does breed for a second time in the year, in south west Asia, the moult could then resume without handicap. Certainly birds arriving at their southern Gulf colonies in late autumn and winter appear to have unworn plumage, as one would expect of a newly-arriving migrant in what is essentially their "spring". It is beginning to look possible that they do not migrate the long distances that are associated with some swift species, such as the common swift *Apus apus*.

In western populations of the pallid swift, the breeding season is the northern summer, April to October, with double-brooding normal (Cramp 1985). Moult commences during the raising of second broods but is suspended for migration. Double-brooding does not appear to be the case in Arabia. This supports the possibility of a second nesting attempt in a different locality which might not be very far away, as close as Baluchistan for example.

If southern Gulf birds do not breed again in south west Asia, then there is the distinct possibility that other populations in south west Asia are locked into a longer leapfrog migration and are

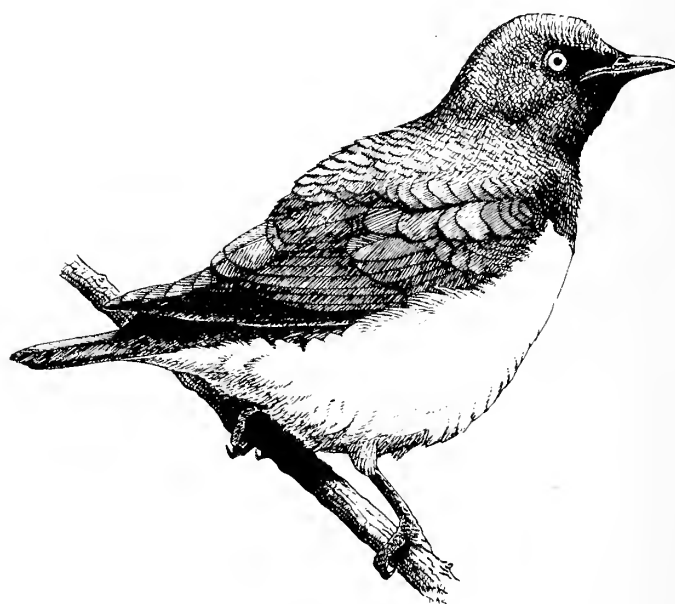
unrelated to birds breeding in Arabia. They would presumably overfly the peninsula in spring and autumn entering Africa in about November and leaving again in February or March. Huge numbers, which greatly outnumber the local breeding population pass through the southern Gulf each year in late February and March into early April, which is after nesting has commenced there. Interestingly, the expected return through the Gulf in autumn does not happen, or at least not at a level which is witnessed, but by then 'local' birds are arriving back at their UAE and northern Oman colonies.

A number of birds winter along the Sind coast of Pakistan (Roberts 1991), yet they do not breed there. Where this population of birds comes from is also unknown, but it is presumably not Arabian breeding birds, unless it comprises immatures and other non-breeders.

Pallid swifts may remain in some southern Gulf breeding sites long enough to raise two broods but no-one has yet confirmed this to be the case and in some instances it is known that only one brood is raised. It is strange that there should be a difference between Gulf and Mediterranean populations in both breeding biology and nesting season. So just where do southern Gulf pallid swifts go for the summer?

**References:** • Cramp, S (ed). 1985. *The Birds of the Western Palearctic*, Vol. IV. Oxford University Press. • Eriksen, J, D E Sargeant & R Victor. 2003. *Oman Bird List. Edition 6*. Centre for Environmental Studies and Research Sultan Qaboos University. • Roberts, T J 1991. *The Birds of Pakistan*. Oxford University Press.

Simon Aspinall, PO Box 45553, Abu Dhabi, UAE (Email: hudhud10@emirates.net.ae)



Amethyst starling *Cinnyricinclus leucogaster* were seen at two localities in eastern Yemen during April 2004, suggesting their breeding range may not be confined to the south west highlands and foothills.



## Journals, Reports and Other Publications

The following notes list some of the papers concerning birds and other wildlife which have appeared in the various journals and newsletters relevant to Arabian birds and the Arabian environment in recent months. Space does not permit the full citation of each article but further information can be obtained from the various societies and organisations shown. Note that in addition to the main papers listed most periodicals also include regular features such as recent reports, brief notes etc.

### PERSGA Publications

PERSGA is the regional organisation for the conservation of the environment of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden (RS&GA) and is represented by all the states surrounding these seas except Eritrea. The organisation has now been in existence for a decade and is producing some very valuable reports on the environment of the region. Three recent reports are mentioned below. Details of these and other reports can be obtained from the PERSGA website: [www.persga.org](http://www.persga.org) or contact Abdullah al Suhaibani, Email: [abdullah.alsuhaibany@persga.org](mailto:abdullah.alsuhaibany@persga.org).

***Status of Breeding Seabirds in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden* (PERSGA Technical Series No 8; November 2003)** by M Shobrak, A al Suhaibani and O al Saghier

The combined length of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden is almost 4000 km and the coastlines of these seas are many times that. It is one of the richest marine ecosystems in the world and the birds are exceptionally interesting but still very poorly studied in many parts of the region. This 69 page report is probably the best ever review of breeding seabirds throughout the RS&GA region. It includes an overview of the geography and climate and a review of the seabird studies to date, state by state. By far the most interesting section is the species accounts for the 17 species regarded as true seabirds, 13 other water birds (herons, osprey, waders etc) and the seven terrestrial species that invariably inhabit coastal sites and habitats. The species accounts record the status and numbers of each species in every part of the region, the type of habitat where they are found and breed plus the months of breeding. Threats are detailed, these are mostly human exploitation, disturbance and destruction of habitat, but the introduction of predators is a serious problem in some areas. The implementation of conservation measures are also dealt with on a state by state basis, covering marine protected areas (MPA), important bird areas (IBA), institutional frameworks and a review of national and international agreements and current laws. A general discussion covers the gaps in knowledge (many local surveys were done 20 years ago), the lack of institutional effectiveness in seabird conservation and the lack of financial resources to do all that its needed - but this baseline document is a good start. It also frankly outlines the limitations and inadequacies of ongoing seabird research and the lack of awareness of some of the problems by the public and officials. There are a series of recommendations to strengthen seabird conservation in the region, through protection of breeding areas, the development of conservation action plans, the need for legislation and the importance of improving awareness amongst the public at large. The report is very well referenced. There are

several maps and colour photos of birds and habitats. Appendices provide tables of the population of each species in the seven PERSGA states, their global and regional status and total RS&GA populations. Tables also provide data on MPA and IBAs and the international treaties and agreements each state is signatory to. A very valuable report.

***Standard Survey Methods for Key Habitats and Key Species in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden* (PERSGA Technical Series No 10; June 2004)**

PERSGA needs to synthesise data from seven very different states with different levels of development and awareness of environmental issues. To help it do this it has produced this 300 page handbook to ensure that all those collecting data in diverse situations do so in a format that is readily comparable to similar data collected elsewhere. The work carries advice on issues such as rapid coastal environmental assessment, intertidal and mangrove habitats, corals, seagrasses and seaweeds, sub-tidal habitats, reef fish, marine turtles, seabirds and marine mammals. There are masses of tables, forms, technical diagrams, often in colour and several colour photos. It is very well referenced throughout. The seabirds section includes very good advice on planning and executing field work and the issues that need to be investigated, in addition to nesting seabirds e.g. human disturbance and exploitation and other threats plus data analysis and presentation. There are also census techniques and issues relating to each species. This book will be a very useful source for anyone planning a seabird or any other marine survey in any part of the world.

***Status of Mangroves in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden* (PERSGA Technical Series No 11; June 2004)**

This 70 page report covers the status of the various mangrove species and habitats around the RS&GA area state by state. It covers impact assessments of various real and potential threats and provides recommendations for the rehabilitation and conservation of mangrove sites. Several colour photos.

### *Tribulus*

*No 13/2 Autumn/Winter 2003*: Nothing on birds but interesting reports, e.g. on Miocene elephant tracks found in western Abu Dhabi and the unusual Saxual *Haloxylon persicum* dew forests of the Abu Dhabi deserts, a habitat where the desert eagle owl, among other species, has been recorded breeding.

Available from the Emirates Natural History Group: PO Box 45553, Abu Dhabi, UAE. ISSN 1019-6019.

Email: [hellyer@emirates.net.ae](mailto:hellyer@emirates.net.ae).

### *Zoology in the Middle East*

Volume 30 (2003) contains 18 papers and short communications but unfortunately nothing on Arabian birds. The only bird article concerns a new breeding site for Bonelli's eagle in south eastern Turkey. Those papers directly concerning Arabia and its surrounding seas are about new fish species recorded in the Red Sea and the hymenoptera (bees and wasps) of the Jeddah region.

It includes an interesting article on the status and distribution of the jungle cat *Felis chaus* in Jordan. Volume 31 (2004) has 14 papers and five short communications, unfortunately again nothing directly concerning Arabian birds but there is an interesting paper on waterbirds at the Anzali wetlands in north western Iran during the winter of 1999-2000 (11000 birds of 55 species). Volume 32 (2004) also has 14 papers and five short notes. Papers of relevance to Arabian birds concern the breeding biology of the Syrian woodpecker in the Gaza Strip, Palestine. With the establishment of orchards and woodlands in northern Saudi Arabia this is a potential breeding species for Arabia in the not too distant future. Another paper concerns how magpies, at the southern limit of their European range in Cyprus, actively select their thermal environment during high ambient temperatures (birds retreated to shade when temperatures rose). A third paper is on the diet of the Alexandrine parakeet in urban Tehran, Iran. Among other papers there are accounts of a herpetological survey of some islands in the Arabian Gulf and the embryonic and larval stages of the Arabian toad. If you wish to subscribe to ZME or obtain a copy of these publication, please check the ZME website for prices and other information. The web site also contains the abstracts of all articles published. The subscription rates for 2004 (3 volumes) are: €98.00 for institutions and €48.00 for individual subscribers. Prices include postage.

Available from Kasperek Verlag, Mönchhofstr. 16, 69120 Heidelberg, Germany. Tel. (+49) 6221/475069, Fax (+49) 6221/471858. Website: [www.kasperek-verlag.de](http://www.kasperek-verlag.de). ISSN 0939-7140.

### ***Fauna of Arabia Vol 20 (2004) Socotra Archipelago special***

This special issue of *the Fauna* presents some 25 papers on the outstanding faunal diversity of the Socotra islands. This “Galapagos of the Indian Ocean” as tour companies like to call the group is now a UNESCO Man and the Biosphere Reserve. This issue includes one important bird paper. Three papers set the scene for the volume. Firstly a wide ranging general introduction paper reviews the ongoing conservation efforts in the islands, including geography, flora (nearly 300 endemic species), terrestrial and freshwater fauna, marine diversity as well as the people, who are now reaping the benefits of the interest the rest of the world is directing to this wonderful place. Secondly, in a diversion from the strict ‘fauna’ subject line there is a paper on the geology and quaternary climate of the island which shows how much the island has in common with Dhofar, southern Oman. A third introductory paper on marine biotopes looks at the diversity of the marine realm around the islands from plankton, seagrass, corals to littoral biotopes such as saltmarsh and mangroves. (Many colour photos of habitats). More regular faunal papers include 20 on invertebrates (including corals, crustaceans arachnids and insects) and two on vertebrates. Perhaps the most important paper is a detailed (110 page) review of the terrestrial isopoda (Crustacea) of the archipelago. Prior to the study only two species were known from the zone but now 38 are listed, including no less than 25 new species described for

science, displaying the same high level of endemism exhibited by other parts of the islands fauna. The vertebrate papers are a checklist of the reptiles of the island and there is a paper on the Somali and Socotra Starlings. Of the reptiles there are four marine species, all turtles and 30 terrestrial species, 27 of which are endemic to the islands. These are mostly lizards, some worm lizards and two non-venomous snakes. All very well illustrated with colour photos. The single ornithological paper is a comparison of the two starlings (grackles) that occur on the island, the Socotra starling *Onychognathus frater*, an endemic, and the Somali starling *O. blythi* which is not found elsewhere in Arabia. The plumages of these birds are described, with details of moult. Calls are compared. In addition their breeding, behaviour, including foraging methods are described. This is probably the most useful paper to date on these two poorly known species.

Hardcover, 556 pages, A4. Since Volume 19 *Fauna of Arabia* has been published by KACST and NCWCD Riyadh and the Senckenberg Museum, Frankfurt. (It was previously published by ProEntomologia). The distributor is Karger Libri, Basle (<http://www.libri.ch/agency/services/faunaofarabia.htm>). ISBN 3-929907-72-0

### **New Books**

*Phoenix* aims to provide details of all new publications which are relevant to the study of birds and wildlife in Arabia or generally to the Arabian/Middle East environment. Most titles mentioned are available in good book shops in Arabia, Europe and North America. Others are on restricted distribution or privately published and readers wishing to obtain copies should contact the author, publisher or distributor mentioned. When ordering through a library or agent quote the ISBN or ISSN number, if given. The prices shown against the following titles are published prices but may include post and packaging. Recommendations made about books are based on the standard of treatment of the subject, format and quality of preparation. A recommendation does not necessarily mean good value for money. Readers are asked to provide details of other new, relevant titles not mentioned in this survey.

#### ***Nomadic Desert Birds* by W Richard J Dean (2004)**

This is the latest (25th) volume to be issued under the *Adaptions of Desert Organisms* series by Springer. Nomadism in birds is a subject little studied or even recognised by many local workers in arid areas, who so often try to pigeon hole irregular occurrences into some sort of migration framework rather than recognise the random nature of nomadic behaviour. Nomads incidentally are defined in this title to include, loosely, all birds that wander in search of food or suitable habitat but excludes nomadic waterbirds such as occur in Australia. The book looks at the subject on a global scale but its main focus is the deserts of southern Africa, the home area of the author, and the Australian bird nomads which is perhaps the best studied region for the subject and probably where nomadism is most pronounced. After an overview of migration and other movements of desert birds there is a review of nomadism by region around the world. These



are rather cursory and it is clear the author is not familiar with the birds of many of the regions but also that there is very little by way of detailed studies on the subject for many deserts. This is particularly so for Arabia which, perhaps not unexpectedly, bearing in mind the paucity of data on the subject from the region, only gets about half a page of text and a table of “..... nomadic species of Saudi Arabia and the UAE” includes several non-breeding visitors, most of which are seasonally predictable and some, such as desert lark *Ammomanes deserti* that are certainly not nomadic and others like the Rufous tailed lark *A. phoenicurus* (of India) which does not occur in Arabia! Other chapters deal with how birds cope with extreme and variable conditions of deserts (deserts incidentally are very widely interpreted to include all areas with low and unpredictable rainfall). The special aspects of population densities, food and foraging, reproduction, moult (supported by a large numbers of maps, graphs, tables and charts) are covered in detail and are a good reference source for these subjects. There are a few B&W plates which unfortunately are poorly reproduced. The high cost no doubt represents the narrow market for technical references of this nature.

*Hard cover. 185 pages (160 x 240 mm). Price £77, €99.95 (plus 7% VAT) , \$139. Published by Springer Verlag, orders to Springer Distribution Centre GMBH, Haberstrasse 7, 69126 Heidelberg, Germany. Email: SDC-bookorder@springer-sbm.com. ISBN 3-540-40393-0, ISSN 1430-9432*

***Fauna of the Socotra Archipelago; Field Guide* by Wolfgang Wranik (2003)**

This is the second handbook of the fauna of Socotra, the first *The Natural History of Socotra and Abd el Kuri* by H O Forbes, was published exactly 100 years previously in 1903, following the joint British Museum and Liverpool Museum expedition of 1898-99. This new book largely represents a summary of the author’s research on the archipelago during the period 1982- 2001, a span of study in the region matched by no one else and covering, in part, the period when the island was administered by the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen. The dimensions of this new book would hardly fit the description of ‘field guide’ as

understood by most birdwatchers. However the breadth of the subjects covered and the uniqueness of much of the Socotran fauna combine to make this a general reference to all the animals on these special islands and also some marine ones. It is a very visual book, illustrated throughout with many hundreds of photos plus lots of line drawings. However there is also a text on all taxa covered. The book starts with a general introduction to the islands, physical features, climate, vegetation, evolutionary history, the unique culture and language of the local people, a history of biological work on the island and conservation activities so far and, importantly, what needs to be done in the future. All birds that occur are listed on a checklist but only selected species are dealt with in any detail under description, range and remarks. Very many are illustrated by photos, including the endemics, the first time some species have had photos published. Apart from the vertebrates there is very good coverage of the special invertebrate fauna of the islands, including arachnids, crustaceans, insects, molluscs and many more. It is probably the invertebrates coverage that is the most valuable being a directory to all the strange life forms that have developed on the island, many of which are found nowhere else.

This is an excellent introduction to the animal life of the Socotra islands and well worth purchasing for anyone planning a visit to the island or who wants to know more about this special place. Recommended.

*Hardcover A4 size 542 pages. Price €79.00 Published by and Available from Universitätsdruckeriei Rostock, Zum Laakkanal 20, 18109 Rostock, Germany. ISBN 3-86009-263-4*

***The Island of Abu al Abyad* by R J Perry (Ed) (2002)**

The island of Abu al Abyad is the largest in the southern Arabian Gulf, lying just west of Abu Dhabi. It is presently in private ownership with a palace, menagerie, agriculture and a plantation. There is still much unspoilt natural habitat, including extensive mangroves, which have become a haven for indigenous wildlife in the region. This book is an account of the island’s natural and human resources, covering geology, archeology, environment



**Trumpeter finches *Bucanetes githaginius* were found sparingly in eastern Yemen this year. They were also present in Kuwait in May in suitable breeding habitat.**

(including marine environment) as well as the plants and wildlife that are currently found there. The bird section is very thorough with a good account of all the 19 breeding species, exotics, migrants and visitors. The breeding birds include a crab plover colony, unique in the UAE, holding probably 2-3 % of the world population of the species and a very important natural asset which the island's owners are very eager to protect. The full bird list of the island has reached 217 and a checklist includes the status of each. There are also extensive notes on the various habitats on the island and the birds in each. The book is illustrated throughout with colour photographs.

*Hardback, 129 pages (300 X 275mm). Price not known. Published by and available from Environmental Research and Wildlife Development Agency (ERWDA) P O Box 45553 Abu Dhabi UAE. ISBN 9948-408-19-5.*



The spotted eagle owl *Bubo africanus* occurs in south west Arabia, the Mahra region straddling eastern Yemen and Oman and an enclave near Muscat from which the Arabian race *B. a. milesi* was described over 100 years ago.

***Whales and Dolphins of Arabia* by Robert Baldwin (2003)**

Whales and dolphins (cetaceans) are an order of mammals that everyone with a care for the environment is familiar with, 'save the whale' having become a conservation catch phrase. They are a group full of superlative statistics, largest animal that ever

lived, biggest brain, ability to dive 2 km deep, able to eat four tons of food a day; yet for all these startling facts they are collectively one of the least known and least understood group of animals on the planet. We all enjoy seeing dolphins off Arabian shores but generally cetaceans are not immediately associated with Arabia, as we tend to think of them as cold seas animals. This book corrects this myth. Arabia is surprisingly rich in its whale and dolphin fauna, with some 21 species recorded, most regularly occurring on the colder and deeper southern shore but almost all have been recorded at least once in the Arabian Gulf and Red Sea. The many include several small species like dolphins but also large baleen whales (the ones that feed on small prey filtered from the water) including the blue whale, the biggest of all, are well represented. Also occurring are the sperm whale, which feed on individual fish or squid in deep dives and the killer whale (now recognised as regular in Arabia) which feeds on turtles and seabirds and sometimes other whales. Cetaceans may be found solitarily or in large groups of several hundred but they are mostly social animals that can communicate with each other in a variety of ways, including echolocation; some are thought to be able to communicate over hundreds of kilometres. They have complex family and social interactions, social care of young, and even strand collectively, a behaviour which is little understood. Some may live for 100 years or more.

The author takes us through the life history of Arabian whales and dolphins in three chapters: the first dealing with general aspects of the cetaceans, (evolution, classification, anatomy, biology, social life, reproduction, migration); the second covering all the Arabian whales and dolphins including species accounts, and lastly cetaceans in mans world. He describes the various marine habitats that are attractive to the various species, including coral reefs and deep ocean trenches and seasonal habitats like the cold up-welling on the southern Arabian shore. In the species accounts he includes the first record of each species in the region and current status, life history in Arabia, preferred habitat and observations of social life etc. For each species there is a data box providing information on size, distribution and breeding status in Arabia, diet and conservation issues. Although this group of animals has been hunted for food and products since prehistoric times, today at a local fisherman level this practice is virtually non-existent. However the author draws attention to a virtually unknown level of whaling in the Gulf of Aden and the Arabian Sea by the Soviets in the early 1960s until, it seems, they killed almost all of the large whales in the region! During this time, 1963-66, more than 3000 whales were harpooned in the area and processed on factory ships, including an amazing 1294 blue whales. Whaling continues around the world generating emotion and controversy. Today in Arabia whales are still regularly killed by man but this is usually by accident through ensnarement with fishing nets, strikes by ships and indirectly through loss of habitat as a result of infilling or dredging of channels and pollution of seas with chemicals, oil, litter and noise. Lastly there is reference to the new Arabian special interest tourism of whale watching, which is now growing in popularity in Oman and also has great potential for Yemen. Everyone loves whales and dolphins for their size, grace and intelligence and this book does a great deal to help us to know them better in the Arabian context. This is the first book on this

group of animals for the whole of Arabia. Highly recommended.

*Hardback, 116 pages (295x225 mm). Price OR 12.5, UAE D.s. 125 or equivalent. Sponsored by Shell in Oman published by the Ministry of Information Oman. ISBN 0 9526605 0 2. If in difficulty finding contact author direct Email: wosoman@omantel.net.om.*

### ***The Gorgonians of the Sinai coast and the Strait of Gubal, Red Sea (Coelenterata, Octocorallia) by Manfred Grasshoff (2000)***

A taxonomic evaluation of the gorgonians of the northern Red Sea, based mainly on material collected in the last three decades. Morphological characters and observations in the field have permitted the identification of 47 species of 27 genera, including 19 species described as new.

*Published as Courier Forschungsinstitut Senckenberg 224. Card cover, 125 pages (A4), 210 figures including many colour photographs. Price not known. Available from Senckenberg Institute, Senckenberganlage 25, D-60325, Frankfurt a. M., Germany. ISBN 3-929907-66-6. Email: Sabine.Jessel@senckenberg.de.*

### **Breeding Season Records of Egyptian Nightjars by Brian Meadows**

Egyptian nightjars *Caprimulgus aegyptius* are regular spring and autumn migrants on the Arabian peninsula with some wintering, notably in Oman and Yemen. There are no breeding records despite much suitable nesting habitat being available and the nearness of breeding populations in southern Iraq and the Arabian Gulf coast of Iran. However, perhaps because of a combination of its crepuscular behaviour and there being relatively few ornithologists active in the field during the hottest months of the year, it could easily have been overlooked during the breeding season in Arabia. I found a pale nightjar in coastal dunes at Jubail (PB31) in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, on 9 July 2001 which I believe, in retrospect, was almost certainly an Egyptian nightjar. During June and early July, 2004 I visited several wetlands at dusk within a radius of 100 km of Jubail, primarily to look for crakes. I discovered a pair of Egyptian nightjars at Khafrah Marsh (PB30) on 24 June and also had a single bird there on 1 July, in apparently suitable breeding habitat.

Khafrah Marsh is an extensive reed-swamp of *Phragmites australis* covering an area of around 300 ha with a permanent water supply that merges into a playa lake fed mainly by winter rainfall. The marsh lies in a dip in the al-Jufurah desert close to the junction between the high un-stable sand dunes of the al-Jufurah proper and low stable dunes of the hummock and hollow variety, with salt-bushes and some clumps of *Panicum* grass. These stable low dunes are much over grazed but in the immediate vicinity of Khafrah Marsh the vegetation is more

verdant with a rich ground flora and an abundance of tamarisk shrubs and small palms in addition to *Panicum*. and salt-bushes.

On 24 June a nightjar was calling and it was watched foraging just above the reeds from an access track which cut through the main area of reed-swamp. Later on this bird was seen with a second bird and both birds alighted on the edge of the swamp where they were watched on the ground to as close as 6 m. They had an overall very pale sandy grey plumage which was much paler than the palest races of Eurasian nightjar *C. europaeus*. In the light conditions prevailing at the time the most immediate diagnostic field character was the marked contrast between pale upperwing coverts and dark flight feathers. While feeding, whitish tipped outer-tail feathers could be seen from below on the presumed male, but I saw no white patches at the side of neck as I have seen on migrant birds in the autumn at both Jubail and Yanbu, in western Arabia. I returned to the area on 1 July and again had excellent views of an Egyptian nightjar from dusk. The bird was watched foraging over an area of reed-swamp during a full moon and later in the headlight of a car.

*Brian S. Meadows, 9 Old Hall Lane, Walton-on-the-Naze, Essex, CO 14 8LE, England.*

### **June Records of Barred Warblers in Saudi Arabia by Brian Meadows**

Spring passage through the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia during 2004 continued later than normal with spotted flycatcher *Muscicapa striata* and red-backed shrike *Lanius collurio* being recorded during the second half of June (latest dates were 22 and 24 respectively). During ten years residence in the Eastern Province I found that the main passage ended prior to June, except in 2000.

On 18 June 2004 I visited the Saudi Arabian - Bahrain causeway and looked for birds in the gardens adjacent to the coastguard station at the international border, which is midway across the Gulf of Bahrain (QA29). The gardens include lawns, manicured bushes and trees with a ground cover of flowering halophytes. Within a fig tree, about 3.6 m high, a barred warbler *Sylvia nisoria* was singing. Song was hurried but melodious with babbling and was quite distinct from the highly fluty nearby singing of the white-cheeked bulbul *Pycnonotus leucogenys*. I peered into the tree and was able to confirm the birds identity, a large, big-headed, grey-toned warbler, having a relatively strong bill, steep forehead and crescentic barring on its underparts. Song was short and intermittent. After a while the bird flew a short distance into another fig tree and recommenced singing. Investigation of the original fig tree revealed another bird, a female. I obtained good views of it although it was alert and nervous. The female was duller and browner than the male but with similar proportions but I thought darker on the head, albeit shading within the foliage may have exaggerated this. Also this bird had far fewer crescentic bars on the underparts.

It is assumed that the birds were still on passage. A late passage movement of barred warblers through the Middle East is not especially exceptional. At Yanbu al Sinayah (EA24) on the Red Sea coast in 1987, I watched a male singing in display flight rather than skulking, on 12 June and P J Baldwin (*pers. comm.*) saw a second bird in a garden approximately 2 km away on the following day.

*B S Meadows, 9 Old Hall Lane, Walton on the Naze, Essex, CO14 8LE England.*

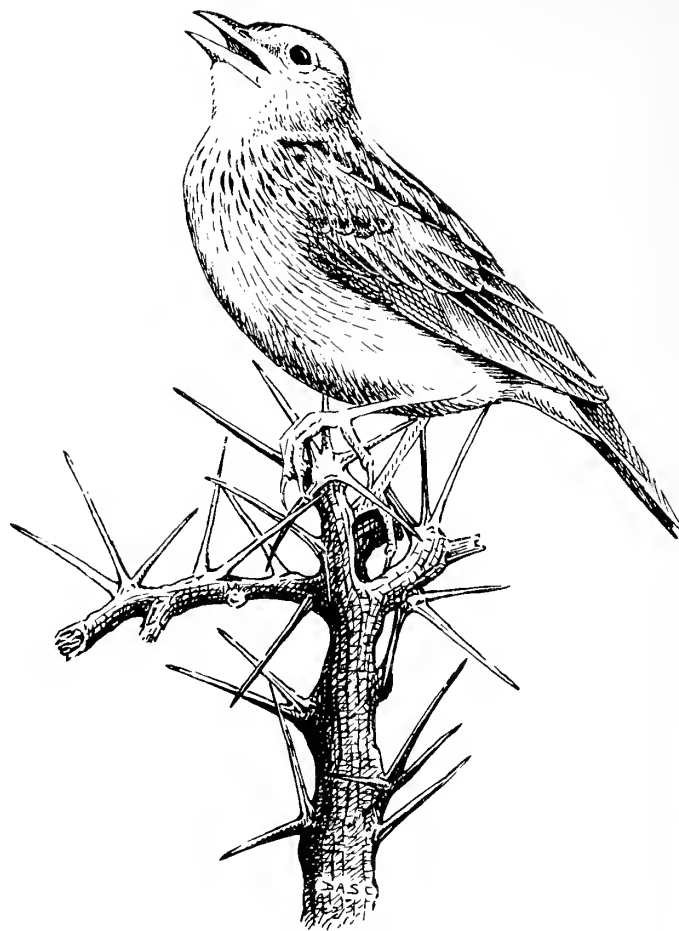
## **ABBA and *Phoenix* Notes and Notices**

### **Contributions to *Phoenix***

*Phoenix* is published annually and contains papers, reports, correspondence and announcements submitted by contributors to the ABBA project and those interested in Arabian birds. Papers are not independently refereed but every effort is made to ensure that content is accurate and correct. However the views expressed by authors are not necessarily shared by the Editor or the sponsors of *Phoenix* or the ABBA project. Articles relevant to the aims of the ABBA project are welcomed, especially notes on new breeding birds, the avifauna of specific areas or studies concerning particular species. Notices of reports and publications etc and requests for information are included free of charge. Articles may be emailed, submitted on disk (please state software), typed or handwritten. Charges for commercial advertisements and loose inserts are available on request.

### **Records still needed**

The ABBA project is nearing an important stage with the publication of the Atlas. However the database will continue to be added to even after publication and the data made available to anyone who needs information on Arabian birds or the region. Readers who have records of Arabian birds, however old, and whether published or not, are urged to make contact with the Co-ordinator. Old records are especially valuable in assessing population changes and range expansions and contractions. For example, were there house sparrows *Passer domesticus* in Abu Dhabi in 1960? No one seems to know for sure. Although the project concerns resident and breeding species, it is not only proved breeding information that is required, notes suggesting possible or probable breeding, particularly uncommon breeding species, are also very valuable. Information on exotics and escaped species, ringed birds and habitats is also needed. There is still much scope for collecting breeding bird information even for the common species in well trodden areas. Would observers please continue to send in records and information for their local area and remember to copy ABBA report sheets to the local bird recorder (if there is one). Any outstanding report sheets for 2004 or earlier years should be sent in as soon as possible. All potential contributors will be sent full instructions on how to submit records, ABBA recording forms, breeding birds list etc or these can be found at the ABBA website: (<http://dspace.dial.pipex.com/arabian.birds/>).



The singing bush lark *Mirafra cantillans* was recorded in eastern Yemen for the first time in 2004

### **How to obtain *Phoenix***

One issue of *Phoenix* is published each year. It is issued free to all current contributors to the ABBA project and is sent to recent correspondents. A bundle of each issue is also passed to all natural history and similar groups active in Arabia. It is available on subscription for a single payment of £20 (€30/US\$37) for the next five issues, i.e. Nos 22-26 inclusive, or by an annual standing order for Sterling bank accounts. Because of excessive bank charges for handling foreign cheques those not having access to a UK bank account are asked to pay in Sterling (£), Euros (€) or US dollar banknotes, or the equivalent in other foreign currency notes. Subscribers will notice that their address label includes a number which indicates the last number of *Phoenix* they have subscribed to. Would subscribers please send in their new subscription before their old sub runs out to avoid the time and expense of reminders. Free copies for those in Arabia and regular correspondents may be discontinued without warning - so to ensure you get a copy of each issue please subscribe. (*It is essential that those getting a free copy acknowledge receipt of this issue and confirm their current address, or future issues will not be sent*). Back issues of *Phoenix* (Nos 1-20) are available at £2/€3/US\$4 each (or the whole set for £25/€35/US\$47) including postage. Those leaving Arabia might be interested in placing a subscription order as the price represents a small sum

for all the news of Arabian birds for five years. Will subscribers please remember to advise of any future change of address.

## The Phoenix

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## Announcements and Requests for information

Announcements of ongoing surveys or the publication of reports etc are free of charge. If any observers have sightings of any of the marked birds mentioned below could details be copied to ABBA for its marked birds database.

### Survey on life history traits and morphology of the House Sparrow

We are collecting data on the house sparrow *Passer domesticus* from populations all over the world. Our aim is to document how life histories and morphology vary with latitude and invasion status (i.e. between native, established, and expanding populations). If you are willing to collaborate and have data, published or unpublished in respect of biometrics, breeding biology or demographics, please contact us. The database, when completed, will be made publicly available. Many thanks in advance for your efforts. Pierre-Yves Henry and Lynn B. Martin, Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology, 301 Guyot Hall, Princeton University, Princeton 08544-1003, New Jersey, USA. Phone: +1 609 258 6118, Fax: +1 609 258 7892, Emails: [lbmartin@princeton.edu](mailto:lbmartin@princeton.edu) and [pHenry@princeton.edu](mailto:pHenry@princeton.edu).

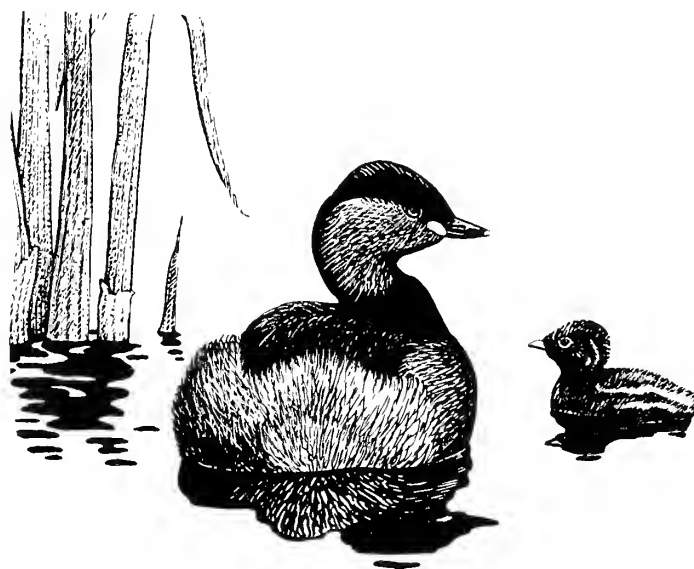
### Sociable Plover colour-ringing scheme: request for re-sightings

During May to July 2004 some 22 adult sociable plovers *Vanellus gregaria* and 94 chicks were fitted with colour rings in breeding areas east of Lake Tengiz near Korgalzhin (50° 35' N, 70° 01' E), central Kazakhstan. The birds were marked with coloured plastic rings above the tibio-tarsal joint according to standard protocols for waders. Colours used during 2004 were red, light blue, yellow, black and white. Five juveniles were also fitted with Russian metal rings on the left tarsus. This scheme is part of a new long-term study sponsored by BirdLife International on this threatened steppe species. We would be grateful for any re-sightings to help us record survival, and especially movements, during the non-breeding season. Sightings with details of colour combinations, location, date, and number

of individuals observed should be sent to: Dr Will Cresswell, Bute Medical Building, University of St Andrews, Fife, KY16 9TS UK. Tel +44 (0)1334 463010, Email: [will.cresswell@st-andrews.ac.uk](mailto:will.cresswell@st-andrews.ac.uk).

### Flamingoes with coloured rings

The chances of seeing colour ringed flamingos around Arabia are high bearing in mind ringing schemes at colonies in Iran, Turkey, Italy, France and Spain and the apparent ease with which flamingos move between colonies. Coloured rings will bear a combination of letters, numbers and stripes, e. g., ABC, 123, AB1, 23W, 1/WAS etc, which will enable any bird to be identified as to when and where it was ringed. If you see a colour ringed bird please report date, place, ring colour, and number to: Christophe Tourenq Email: [ctourenq@erwda.gov.ae](mailto:ctourenq@erwda.gov.ae).



Some 1320 little grebes *Tachybaptus ruficollis* were present at al Warsen Lake (VA27) UAE on 31 July 2003.

### Wing tagged Imperial Eagle and Steppe Eagles from Kazakhstan

For the past two years young imperial eagles *Aquila heliaca* have been wing tagged in northern Kazakhstan and last winter one of the marked birds was observed at a rubbish dump in Oman. The wing tags are in a variety of colours and each has a unique letter-number combination on the tag which is clearly visible. A small number of steppe eagles *A. nipalensis* were also similarly marked. White-tailed sea eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla* have also been tagged in the state. Todd Katzner, Email: [tkatzner@imperial.ac.uk](mailto:tkatzner@imperial.ac.uk) or Evgeny Bragin, Email: [naurzum@mail.kz](mailto:naurzum@mail.kz).

### Wing-tagged Black Vultures from Armenia

Black vultures *Aegypius monachus* seen in Arabia in winter could come from anywhere to the north. In 2003 (and possibly 2004) birds were wing tagged (blue with white lettering) containing 'ARX'. If seen report details to Mamikon Ghasabian Armenian Society for the Protection of Birds, Garegin Njdeh 27/2, 10 Yerevan 375026, Armenia. Email: [armbirds@yahoo.com](mailto:armbirds@yahoo.com).

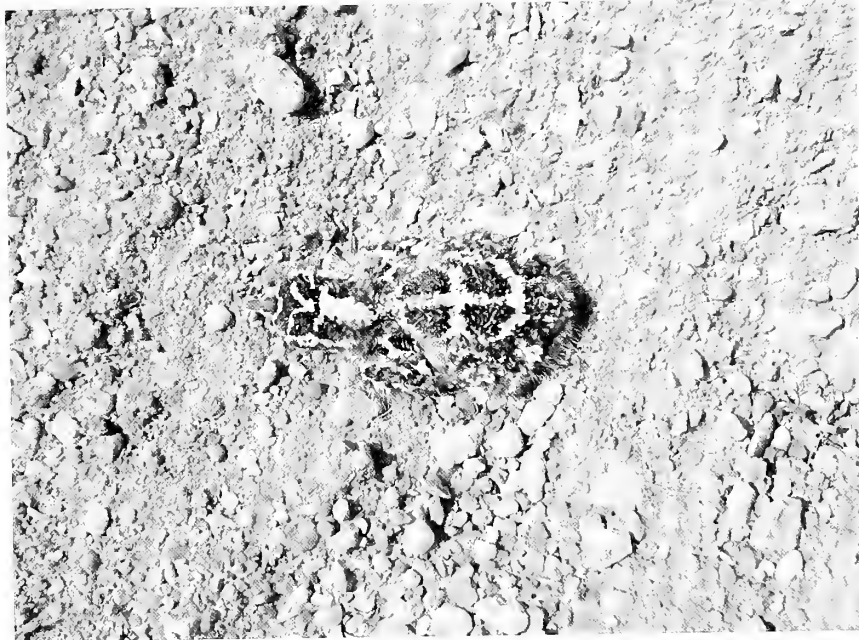








Water runs in the Wadi Meseila for over 200 km but in April 2004 there were surprisingly few wetland birds, residents or migrants, exploiting this habitat. (Photo: Mike Jennings).



The chestnut-bellied sandgrouse *Pterocles exustus* breeds in very arid regions of eastern Yemen with limited green vegetation and no surface water. Chicks walk in the shade of adults when tiny. When disturbed a vocal signal from the adults keeps the chicks motionless on the ground whilst the adults walk away from them before flying off. (Photo: Mike Jennings).



The surface of the crater-like top of Barakah island off Bir Ali was strewn with dead chicks of Socotra cormorant *Phalacrocorax nigrogularis* providing confirmation that the species breeds on this island, probably during September to December. (Photo: Yousef Mohageb).

(Announcements - continued)

## **CD of Riyadh Ramblers publications**

The Riyadh Ramblers, otherwise known as the Riyadh Natural History Society, are compiling a CD of all the publications and reports of the group since they started in the mid 1970s. This will include many photos, facsimiles of publications, indexes of authors, subjects and places and much more. Those interested in this valuable resource can get details from the RNHS Chairman Axel Nelms, Email: [axel@bcs.org.uk](mailto:axel@bcs.org.uk).

## **Report on the Birds of the Rub al Khali Periphery**

During the period 1995 to 1997 six ABBA surveys (Nos 17 - 22) were directed to the periphery of the Empty Quarter (Rub al Khali), and the surveys to Saudi Arabia (2), Yemen, Oman (2) and the UAE completely circumnavigated this huge sand sea, visiting mainly areas which are either very poorly reported for birds or never previously visited. The report of these surveys has now been published thanks to a generous grant from the OSME Conservation Research Fund. In total the surveys visited and collected information from some 226 ABBA half degree atlas squares. Numerous extensions to previously known ranges were determined and the status of other species in this poorly known region were clarified. Information was collected of populations during 43 early morning transect censuses. A checklist of all the species seen during the surveys is given, this includes migrants and visitors. The report is complete with 35 distribution maps showing the distribution of some of the more widespread species noted during the surveys and 18 colour plates illustrating the variety of habitats. Detailed information about places visited, itineraries and site co-ordinates are also provided. This report is the only detailed publication to appear dealing with the birds of this region. Copies have been passed to regional societies and institutions and a few are for sale at £15 (€20/US\$28). Available from the ABBA Coordinator. Michael C Jennings, Coordinator Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Arabia, Warners Farm House, Warners Drove, Somersham, Cambridgeshire, PE28 3WD England. Email: [arabian.birds@dial.pipex.com](mailto:arabian.birds@dial.pipex.com).

## **Second Regional Forum for the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden Region, (Sea to Sea)**

PERSGA, the Regional Organization for the Conservation of the Environment of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden is organizing the Sea to Sea Forum in Cairo, 14-16 February 2005 as a contribution to protecting the marine environment and ensuring the sustainable use and management of it. The forum aims to provide a structured platform for decision makers, government officials, experts, practitioners, relevant private sector representatives and NGOs to discuss the challenges facing marine and coastal areas in the region, to share experiences and identify actions to encourage environmental best practice in integrated coastal zone management and to foster the development of regional and international cooperation. The Forum focuses on three main themes, Integrated Coastal Zone Management,

Biodiversity and Nature Conservation and Reduction of Maritime Pollution. The event offers technical sessions, discussion workshops, roundtables and a poster and technical exhibition session to encourage discussions among a wide range of stakeholders, experts and practitioners.

Details from PERSGA website: [www.persga.org](http://www.persga.org) or Abdullah al Suhaibani, Email: [abdullah.alsuhaibany@persga.org](mailto:abdullah.alsuhaibany@persga.org).

## **Bibliography of Arabian Ornithology**

A by-product of the ABBA project has been the production of an extensive list of references, published and unpublished, which provide information concerning birds in Arabia. This working bibliography is a valuable resource for the ABBA project and will eventually be worked up and published as a separate booklet. The April 2004 version of the draft bibliography has been prepared and contains in excess of 1800 references. A soft copy of the bibliography will be sent free of charge to anyone interested in Arabia birds. It is not currently prepared in database format and neither does it have keyword tools in the soft copy. However it is a useful research aid as it can be searched for individual words such as species, places, subjects or second authors, etc., using the 'Find' facility in a word processing package. This live document is continually being updated and the ABBA project would appreciate comments from readers if they notice errors, have suggestions for improvements or have additional references for Arabia. Those requiring a free copy should email the ABBA Coordinator stating preference for MSWord(2000)/WordPerfect (Ver 9). A soft copy on disk is £5 (includes surface postage). Hard copies are not available but one can be printed on request, 40 pp (7pt, 2 col text) at £10 each (includes surface postage). Michael C Jennings, Coordinator Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Arabia, Warners Farm House, Warners Drove, Somersham, Cambridgeshire, PE28 3WD England. Email: [arabian.birds@dial.pipex.com](mailto:arabian.birds@dial.pipex.com).

## **Sites of Interest**

This column aims to provide details of the variety of bird habitats throughout Arabia and the representative breeding and resident birds to be found in each. The series of site reports appearing in the issues of *Phoenix* are not intended as a kind of "where to watch birds in Arabia" or a directory to the most prolific bird sites, although a number of them are exceptionally good bird areas.

Observers are invited to write up other sites, especially those that they have studied reasonably well, drawing special attention to the breeding and resident species that occur. A site may be as small as a sewage pond or similar microsite, an urban area or as large as a whole mountain range.

A directory and location map of the 45 of sites covered in the previous issues of *Phoenix* can be seen at page 17. The series of site reports continues on pages 18-20 with a report on the breeding wetland birds at Al Warsen Lake, Dubai, UAE.

# Habitats and Sites that have appeared in *Phoenix* so far (Issues 1-20)

## Saudi Arabia

Layla lakes (MB21), *Phoenix* 1.3, 4.6 & 12.19

Jebel Warjan (FA24), *Phoenix* 2.3

Yanbu al Sinaiyah (EA24), *Phoenix* 3.3

Al Arid escarpment (LA16, KB12), *Phoenix* 4.5

Harrat al Harrah (EA38, FA37), *Phoenix* 5.8

Farasan islands (HB10, IA10), *Phoenix* 5.8

Tabuk lagoons (CB33), *Phoenix* 6.7

Jebel al Lawz (BA34), *Phoenix* 6.8

Wabbah crater (HA22), *Phoenix* 7.9

Empty Quarter (ca QA19), *Phoenix* 8.13

King Khalid Airport (PB30), Jubail, *Phoenix* 9.18

Judhaym island (QA27), *Phoenix* 10.6

Islets, Yanbu al Bahr (DB25), *Phoenix* 10.7

Bani Yazid (HA17), Hejaz, *Phoenix* 12.4

Sharawrah (NA11), Empty Quarter, *Phoenix* 13.3

Wadi Nimar (MB26), Riyadh, *Phoenix* 13.24

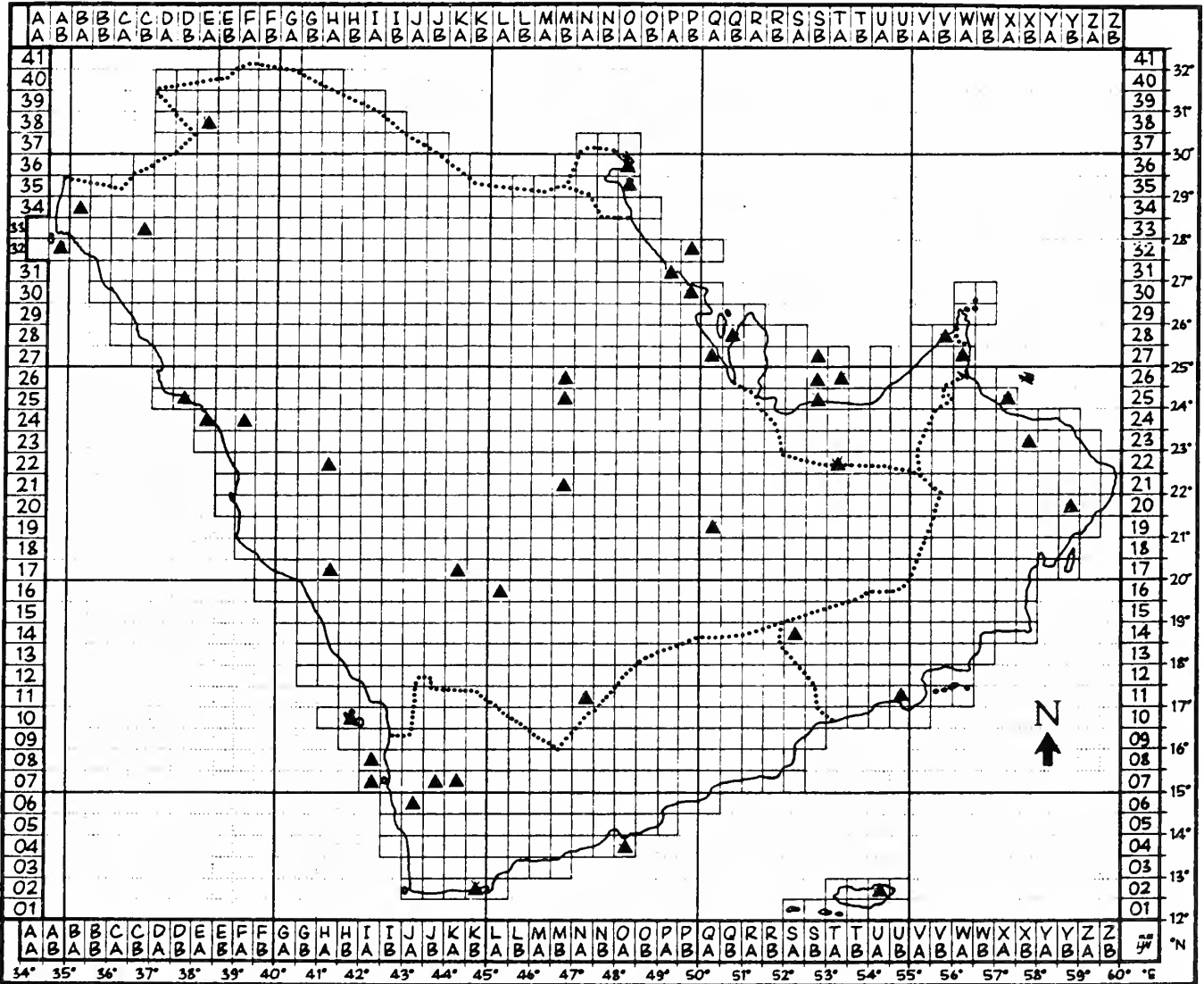
Wajid sandstones (KA17-KB12), *Phoenix* 14.5

Riyadh river (MB26-MB25), *Phoenix* 14.18 & 16.19

Karan island (PB32) Arabian Gulf, *Phoenix* 17.11

Tiran island (AB32), Red Sea, *Phoenix* 17.20

Sabkha al-Fasl (PA31), Eastern Province *Phoenix* 20:12



## Yemen

Wadi Boglar (KA07, KA06), *Phoenix* 3.4

Jebel Nabi Shuayb (JB07, KA07), *Phoenix* 4.5

Aden wetlands (KB02), *Phoenix* 13.4

Socotra, (ca UA02) *Phoenix* 18:17

Bir Ali islands (OA04/OA05), *Phoenix* 19:11

Zubair islands (IA07), Red Sea, *Phoenix* 19:16

Islands north of Kamaran (IA08-IB07), *Phoenix* 19:18

Wadi Rijaf (JA06), Jebel Bura, *Phoenix* 20:11

## Oman

Wahiba sands (ca YB20), *Phoenix* 6.7

Gulf of Oman (ca XA25, *Phoenix* 16.15

Southern Empty Quarter (SA14-TB13), *Phoenix* 17.15

Jebel Samhan (UB11-VA12), Dhofar, *Phoenix* 18:13

Saiq plateau (XB23), *Phoenix* 19:10

## UAE

Das island (SB27), *Phoenix* 5.5 & 16.3

Qarnayn island (SB26), *Phoenix* 5.5 & 7.7

Liwa oasis (TA22, UA23), *Phoenix* 5.6

Masafi (WA27), *Phoenix* 5.7

Khor Kalba (WA27), *Phoenix* 7.8

Digdaga and Hanraniyah (VB28), *Phoenix* 8.12

Abu Dhabi islands (ca TA26), *Phoenix* 11.15

Sir Bani Yas island (SB25), *Phoenix* 12.3

## Kuwait

Kubbar island (OA35), *Phoenix* 6.8

Bubiyan islands (OA36), *Phoenix* 19:5

## Bahrain

Hawar islands (QB28), *Phoenix* 15.10

# The Breeding Birds of Al Warsen Lake, Dubai, UAE

by David A. Diskin

Al Warsen Lake lies to the south of the Dubai-Hatta Road in the Awir district of Dubai. It consists of a number of pools set in a flat desert landscape. The pools were formed in the late 1990s when excess water was pumped from the nearby Dubai sewage treatment plant into pits which had been excavated by a construction company. It was discovered by birdwatchers at the end of 1998 and was previously known as the Wimpey Pits, after the name of the construction company that carried out the excavations. The amount of water in the excavated pits has varied over the years, depending upon the amount of treated effluent discharged from the sewage plant. It was at its most extensive in the 2002/2003 winter when the total area under water was more than twice the area of the present pools of 5 ha. Infilling of the area for the construction of 'International City', a major development project, began in Spring 2003. The remaining pools are still extensive enough to support a rich variety of bird life. There are plans to preserve the remaining pools and make the area a protected nature reserve.

Currently al Warsen Lake consists of three contiguous pools. The eastern pool is embanked apart from where it meets the central pool, from which it is separated by a long line of reeds *Phragmites australis*. The north-eastern corner of this pool is reed-covered, and there are also other patches of reeds on the eastern and south-eastern edges of the pool. The central pool is much smaller than the other pools and is almost totally surrounded by reeds. The western pool is larger and more open than the other two pools apart from in its reed-covered north-eastern corner where it joins the central pool. The pools form an integral and highly important part of an ecologically rich area based around the sewage treatment plant. The water from the treatment plant is also used to irrigate fodder crops and short turf, grown for use in landscaping gardens. The irrigated fodder fields, with pivot irrigation, (known to birdwatchers as the Pivot Fields) lie just to the north-east of the pools at al Warsen. Certain species are dependent upon both the fields and the lakes and there is often visible movement between the two habitats. The proximity of the fields and the pools to one another enhances the ornithological value of both.

A total of 185 species of birds has been recorded at al Warsen since 1999, which is roughly 44% of the total number of species known to have occurred in the UAE. This is a very high number of species from a single site and is a clear indication of its attractiveness to birds. The pools are an important site for wintering waterfowl. In January 2004, a total of 1425 ducks of ten species were present, including a regionally significant count of 441 common pochard *Aythya ferina*. A number of rarities such as mute swan *Cygnus olor*, whooper swan *Cygnus cygnus*, cotton teal *Nettapus coromandelianus*, marbled teal *Marmaronetta angustirostris* and pectoral sandpiper *Calidris melanotos* have also been recorded at the lake.

Apart from its attractiveness to winter visitors and passage migrants, al Warsen Lake is also a very important site for breeding wetland

birds. It's reedbeds, aquatic vegetation, and sandy-cum-rocky shoreline and surroundings provide ideal nesting sites for a number of species, including purple gallinule *Porphyrio porphyrio* which has only bred at one other site in Arabia and red-knobbed coot *Fulica cristata* which has bred nowhere else in the Arabian peninsula. Another species, the white-tailed plover *Chettusia leucura* is only known to breed regularly at al Warsen in the whole of the Arabian peninsula. The sloping sides of the pits, as well as the areas of sand and gravel that separate the eastern pool from the western pool, provide breeding sites for a further four wader species.

The purpose of this short paper is to give details of the wetland species that are known to breed at al Warsen Lake, including those which may be regarded as potential breeders. Non-wetland birds breeding at the site, which are more widespread in the UAE, are listed at the end.

## Breeding and Potential Breeding Wetland Species

**Little grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis*** Good numbers are present throughout the year, with 30 or more pairs breeding. Post-breeding flocks regularly occur in summer and there were 1320, 31 July, 2003. Such high numbers are unprecedented in Arabia, making al Warsen the most important site for this species in the region.

**Black-necked grebe *Podiceps nigricollis*** A winter visitor to the UAE with a few on passage and in summer. It bred in 2000 at al Wathba Lake in Abu Dhabi. At al Warsen it is a potential breeding species. Recorded as a regular winter visitor with peak numbers in March, the highest count was 217, 7 March 2003. A few individuals over-summer and 55 were still present, 9 May, 2004, which is an unusually high number for the time of year.

**Little bittern *Ixobrychus minutus*** Recorded as a passage migrant in very small numbers and occasionally in summer. It is an opportunist breeding visitor to the other parts of the UAE and may breed one day at al Warsen.

**Cattle egret *Bubulcus ibis*** Up to 130 roost in partially submerged trees from September to March. Smaller numbers occur throughout the summer months, 31 came to roost at dusk on 16 May, 2004 and breeding is suspected to occur in the al Awir district.

**Glossy ibis *Plegadis falcinellus*** Rather scarce migrant and winter visitor to the UAE. It is a potential breeding bird at al Warsen. The adjacent pivot fields are a very important site for this species, with up to 24 feeding there and roosting in partially submerged vegetation in the 2002/2003 winter. Three birds were present in summer 2002 when at least one bird was seen carrying nesting material, although there was no other evidence of nesting. Up to 15 occurred during the 2003/2004 winter with one remaining into May 2004. This species is not yet known to breed anywhere in the Arabian peninsula.

**Egyptian goose *Alopochen aegyptiacus*** An introduced species breeding ferally at several sites in the UAE. At al Warsen it is occasionally recorded in small numbers. A pair bred and raised eight young in summer 2001.

**Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*** Regular winter visitor with a peak count of 205 in November 2003. Some, possibly feral birds remain in summer and successful breeding was recorded in 2002 and 2003.

**Ferruginous duck *Aythya nyroca*** Rather scarce and irregular winter visitor and passage migrant to the UAE and a potential breeding species at al Warsen. Up to six birds winter there regularly, the 2003/2004 winter was exceptional when up to 30 were present in November 2003. One or two birds usually remain during the summer.

**Water rail *Rallus aquaticus*** Has bred once in the UAE at Ruwais in May 1995 and is a potential breeding species at al Warsen. Presently known as an irregular winter visitor with up to three present in the 2000/2001 winter. It is possibly regular but overlooked because of its skulking habits.

**Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*** Common breeding resident with more than 25 pairs, also a winter visitor.

**Purple gallinule *Porphyrio porphyrio*** Although considered to be a vagrant to the UAE, there have been sporadic sightings of single birds at al Warsen since March 2001. In October and November 2003 three birds were present and on 22 April 2004 a young juvenile was seen with an adult amongst the reeds surrounding the central pool. This species once bred in Kuwait but this is the first breeding record from eastern Arabia. (NB A number of purple gallinules were released on al Abyad island (TB25), west of Abu Dhabi in the late 1990s, some of which were still present in mangroves there in 2002 but they never bred).

**Common coot *Fulica atra*** A localised winter visitor and passage migrant to the UAE. At al Warsen one pair bred and raised three young in 2002, the first breeding record for the UAE. At least two pairs bred successfully in 2003 and numbers increased considerably in the 2003/2004 winter, with up to 87 birds being recorded, a maximum count for the UAE. Several pairs bred successfully in summer 2004. (See next species for possibility of hybridisation).

**Red-knobbed coot *Fulica cristata*** One adult in breeding plumage was present from June 2002 until at least the end of January 2004, which was the first record for the UAE and the fifth for the Arabian peninsula. The previous sightings were all in Dhofar, Oman from 1999 to 2002. The adult was joined by two other birds, considered to be immatures, in November 2003 and two more immatures were recorded in January 2004, bringing the total present to five. The plumage features of the 2003 immatures were indicative of red-knobbed coot because of the shape of the bill-shield (molar-shaped at the top), lack of sharp-pointed facial feathering at the base of the bill, a bluish tinge to the bill and lack of a white trailing edge to wing. Two of the five birds remained into spring and were seen accompanying a chick on the central pool on 31 March and 1 April 2004 but the chick was not seen again after that. The pair evidently bred again and another single chick was seen with its parents on 30

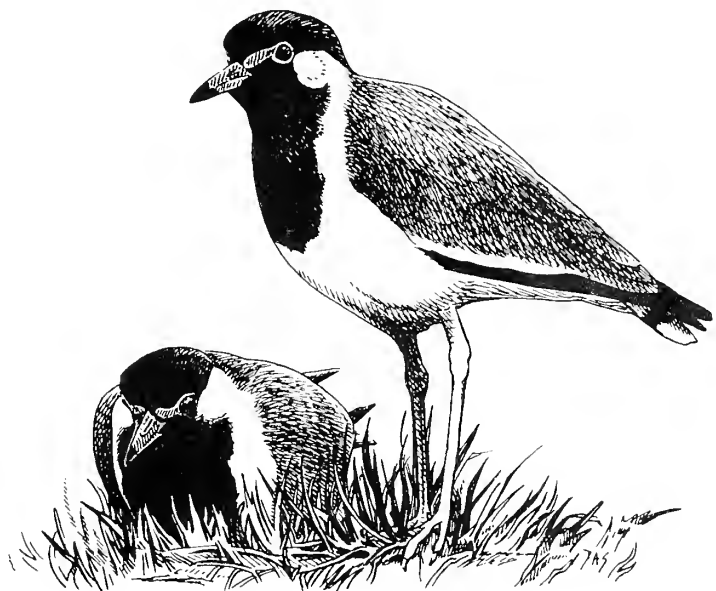
April and 9 May 2004. This is the only breeding record in Asia of this predominantly African species. With hindsight of these occurrences it seems more likely that the four immature birds were in fact hybrids, hatched during 2003, from a mating, or matings, between the adult red-knobbed coot (present since June 2002) and common coot(s) *F. atra*, rather than pure bred immature birds that had arrived independently from somewhere else.

**Black-winged stilt *Himantopus himantopus*** Al Warsen is one of the most important breeding and wintering sites for this species in the UAE, the more so now that one of the other main sites, Qurrayah Pools at Fujairah, dried up in May 2004, on the cessation of sewage dumping there. Of 170 birds counted on 18 July 2002, 60-70% were juveniles. In 2004 at least 20 pairs bred and a minimum of 30 chicks were seen on 16 May. Numbers increase in autumn/winter, the maximum count has been 361, 11 October 2002.

**Collared pratincole *Glareola pratincola*** Regular spring and autumn passage migrant with a high count of 18, 31 August 1999. Birds move between the pools and the nearby pivot fields. Up to eight birds were present in the area in summer 2004. This species breeds at Sohar in northern Oman and must be a potential breeder in the al Warsen area.

**Little ringed plover *Charadrius dubius*** Several pairs breed.

**Kentish plover *Charadrius alexandrinus*** Regular breeder, more than 15 pairs.



**Red-wattled plover *Hoplopterus indicus*** Common resident in the UAE, increasing rapidly in the northern emirates and expanding into Abu Dhabi as new suitable wetlands become available. Several pairs breed at al Warsen.



**White-tailed plover *Chettusia leucura*** Probably at least four pairs have bred annually at this site since 1999. This is the only established breeding site for the species in the Arabian peninsula, although it has bred previously at Dhahran in 1992 and 1993 and in Sharjah. Numbers are augmented in winter. At least 30 were present 16 May 2003, suggesting a substantial increase in the number of potential breeding pairs at this site. More than six pairs bred around the shores of the pools in summer 2004 and there were at least four other breeding pairs elsewhere in the area of the sewage treatment plant.

**Eastern reed warbler *Acrocephalus scirpaceus fuscus*** A regular passage migrant and localised breeding summer visitor to the UAE since 1992. Five or more pairs breed in the reedbeds annually at al Warsen.

**Clamorous reed warbler *Acrocephalus stentoreus*** A fairly common breeding resident in the UAE. At al Warsen it is regular in winter, may occur in summer and is therefore a potential breeding species.

***Non-waterbird breeding species at al Warsen which are more widely distributed in the UAE.***

Grey francolin *Francolinus pondicerianus*, breeding resident. Eurasian collared dove *Streptopelia decaocto*, breeding resident. Palm dove *Streptopelia senegalensis*, breeding resident. Little green bee-eater *Merops orientalis*, several pairs breed around the pools. Hoopoe *Upupa epops*, has bred, regular in small numbers at the pivot fields. Crested lark *Galerida cristata*, resident breeder. White-cheeked bulbul *Pycnonotus leucogenys*, resident breeder. Graceful warbler *Prinia gracilis*, breeding resident. Purple sunbird *Nectarinia asiatica*, breeding resident. Southern grey (great grey) shrike *Lanius meridionalis (excubitor)*, breeds around the pivot fields but development may have discouraged breeding around the pools. Bank mynah *Acridotheres ginginianus*, fifteen birds were seen around a small colony of six nest holes in a sand bank, 14 May 2004. House sparrow *Passer domesticus*, resident breeder. Indian silverbill *Euodice malabarica*, resident breeder. Streaked weaver *Ploceus manyar*, several pairs breed in the reedbeds.

*D A Diskin, PO Box 56, Ma On Shan Post Office, New Territories, Hong Kong. (Email: dadiskin@netvigator.com).*

## **ABBA Survey 33; Eastern Yemen April 2004** by M C Jennings

Although I have previously visited eastern Yemen on four occasions (*Phoenix* 6:9-10, 13:3-5, 15:14-15 and 19:11-20) there remained several ABBA squares for which there were no records on the database. The main purpose of my visit in April 2004 was to obtain bird distribution information from a half dozen such squares (PA11, QA10, QB10, RA10, RA08 and NB06) for which there are no records at all on the ABBA database, which I thought would be relatively easy to get to. My visit was arranged, with a lot of help from David Stanton, through Arabian Ecotours who made all the arrangements and provided a 4WD vehicle.

The survey took place from 1 - 28 April, camping most nights except hotel stops in Seiyun, Mukallah and Sana'a. The route taken (see map) was from Seiyun in the Wadi Hadramaut, down the Wadi Meseila, to the coast of the Gulf of Aden and then eastwards to Ras Fartak, turning north al Ghaydah and then on to the al Hawf coastal region in the extreme east of Yemen abutting the Oman border. From al Ghaydah I returned to the Wadi Hadramaut via a northern loop touching Wadi Rumah. Leaving the Hadramaut again I went south across the high Jol to Mukallah, Wadi Hajar and later the islands of Barakah and Sikha off Bir Ali. On returning to the Wadi Hadramaut some of its tributary wadis were visited. In the event I was able to get to five of the six 'empty' squares that I had targeted. I missed out on square PA11 mainly because a few days were lost from my schedule because of a vehicle accident at Ras Fartak. The weather during the period was warm and settled, although we just missed rain on several occasions. There was running water or significant pools in all major wadis except Wadi Bin Ali and Wadi Sar.

Getting around in Yemen is a little difficult at present mainly because the authorities are extremely anxious to ensure the security of tourists. This means a lot of road blocks and the need to show permits regularly. In some places the overzealous police and military at road blocks can be difficult about documentation and small parties or single tourists attract most attention. A Yemeni accomplice is essential. However once the system is understood the problems become straightforward although still frustrating. I never at any time felt insecure on the trip and the people of Yemen were as friendly as ever.

Altogether some 71 breeding or potentially breeding species were recorded during the survey, selected observations follow. Very few migrants were noted and it was especially surprising that the Wadi Meseila, which has well over 200 km of running water at the time produced only a handful of waders, greenshank *Tringa nebularia* and common sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos* and herons, little egret *Egretta garzetta* and grey heron *Ardea cinerea*. Some selected notes follow. For details of previous observations during ABBA surveys to eastern Yemen and comments on change of status, consult the issues of *Phoenix* mentioned at paragraph one above.

**Little grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis*** One at a large, deep reed fringed pool beside Wadi Hajar, 20 April, appeared to be on breeding territory.

**Brown booby *Sula leucogaster*** Only four were present at Sikha island, 22 April, compared to 300 there in July 2002.

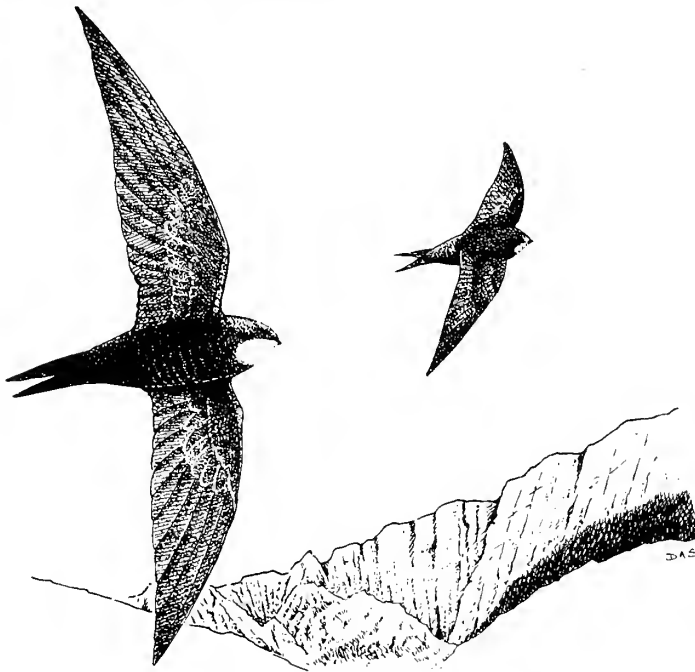
**Socotra cormorant *Phalacrocorax nigrogularis*** Only 18 birds present on Barakah island, 22 April, and these appeared to be mostly juveniles, which compares to 10,000 breeding pairs there in July 2002. However breeding was proved on the island by the numerous remains of dead chicks in the shallow, crater like, depression on the top of the island. On the Hawar islands,





**Hume's owl *Strix butleri*** Calling at six sites, Wadis Hadramaut, Meseila, Idinut, Kidut, Khun and Bin Ali.

**Plain nightjar *Caprimulgus inornatus*** Calling Wadi Khun, 16 & 17 April and Wadi Hajar, 20 April.



**Forbes-Watson's swift *Apus berliozii*** Swifts, mostly with large white throat patches, probably this species, were over the coastal towns of Haswain, al Ghaydah and Bir Ali.

**Malachite kingfisher *Alcedo cristata*** This bird was not recorded despite a search in the several wadis holding flowing water and the two sites it has been reported previously, Wadi Khun and Wadi Hajar. Local people in Wadi Meseila and Wadi Hajar indicated they knew this small crested kingfisher and correctly picked it out in a field guide. They regarded it as a summer visitor.

**Hoopoe *Upupa epops*** None in the Wadi Hadramaut in early or mid April but there were several around and busy nest building and calling from 24 April onwards, suggesting a summer influx.

**Singing bush lark *Mirafra cantillans*** One in the grounds of a hotel under construction near al Hawf, 11 April. Apparently not previously reported from eastern Yemen but is common locally over the border in Dhofar, Oman.

**Bar-tailed desert lark *Ammomanes cincturus*** Individuals east of al Abr, 1 April and Wadi Rumah, 15 April.

**Shining sunbird *Nectarinia habessinica*** Widespread, often common, Wadi Meseila, Qishn, Wadi Idinut, Wadi Kidut, Wadi al Ashar, Wadi Hajar and Wadi Duan.

**Orange-tufted sunbird *Nectarinia osea*** Rather scarce and local, few Wadi Meseila, Hawf area and north of al Ghaydah.

**House crow *Corvus splendens*** This crow is now common in the al Ghaydah area, since first being recorded in the town in 1989. In that year it was rather scarce in Mukallah but is now very common there

with nest building and probably incubation in progress.

**Amethyst starling *Cinnyricinclus leucogaster*** A male in the western (upper) Wadi Hajar, 20 April and a pair were in Wadi Duan, 24 April. There are no previous records of this species from these regions, possibly due to observer bias. (There are very few summer observations of any kind from eastern Yemen).

These records indicate that the species is perhaps a summer visitor to these parts of Yemen.

**House sparrow *Passer domesticus*** Although common in the Wadi Hadramaut and some large towns like Mukallah its distribution is increasingly patchy travelling eastwards in Yemen. They were common in al Ghaydah (where they were absent in 1989) but were not recorded at Fatk al Hawf or on the desert road to Shahan.

**Arabian golden sparrow *Passer euchlorus*** There were many used nests of this species in acacia trees near Mayfaah but no birds were present. I have now seen unoccupied colonies of the species in this region in April, July and December but have never seen the birds. It appears to have a wandering, breeding regime. It is clearly only a visitor to this part of Yemen, which might be regarded as an arid extension of its favoured Tihama habitat.

**Trumpeter finch *Bucanetes githagineus*** A few Wadi Meseila 4 April and two groups Wadi Rumah 15 April, also drinking at a khareef (manmade water reservoir), 16 April.

I would like to acknowledge all the help I received from David Stanton in Sana'a, who contributed to the success of the survey in many ways, especially during my planning. His help included, *inter alia*, loan of camping equipment, accommodation in Sana'a, and currency wheeling and dealing on my behalf. The Ornithological Society of the Middle East very generously provided financial support of £500 from their Conservation Research Fund which was a significant contribution towards survey costs and made a tremendous difference to my plans. I am very grateful to Yousef Mohageb of Arabian Ecotours for all the arrangements he undertook to make the survey a success and for getting me around with the minimum of formality.

**Reference:** • King, H. 2004. Communal behaviour of Socotra Cormorant, Bahrain. *Phoenix* 20: 25-28.

## Do you have a database of bird records from Arabia?

Some observers have excused themselves from not sending in ABBA breeding bird reports by claiming they have so much data that to go through it all to compile reports for ABBA in the preferred format would take just too long! If you feel this reflects your own situation why not just email a copy of your database to ABBA (most commonly used PC software can be handled) to [arabian.birds@dial.pipex.com](mailto:arabian.birds@dial.pipex.com). Records will be extracted in the ABBA office and you will be provided with a list of records used by ABBA.

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- An introduction to the ABBA project.
- Instructions to those wishing to contribute records and the forms to use. It includes a list of Arabian breeding birds with short notes on status and distribution of each.
- A Bibliography of many hundreds of references to Arabian birds. This can be used as a search tool for species, subjects and places. (But see announcement on page 16).
- Index to previous *Phoenix* issues.
- *Phoenix* subscriptions and items for sale.
- Digital images from recent ABBA surveys.

## The Locusts are coming! The Locusts are coming!

In the latter part of 2004 significant movements of desert locusts *Schistocerca gregaria* within North Africa and arrivals of swarms on the Atlantic islands, Cyprus, southern Turkey and Lebanon are almost without precedent in the last 50 years. It seems highly likely that locust movements will reach some parts of the Arabian peninsula during the next 12 months.

There have been no significant locust swarms on the Arabian mainland since 1988 (*Phoenix* 6:16). The arrival of locust swarms,

which are a superabundant food source for many bird species, often prompts birds to act out of character. They may breed at unusual times, have larger clutches than normal or have multiple clutches when they are usually single clutches. There are a number of species which are renowned for following locust swarms and some may come all the way from Africa, also migrants may stop over longer to take advantage of the glut of food and may breed. We might expect records, perhaps even breeding, of species which do not normally breed in Arabia, such as wattled starling *Creatophora cineracea* and rosy starling *Sturnus roseus*. Others like Abdim's stork *Ciconia abdimii* and Arabian bustard *Ardeotis arabs* are often associated with these swarms and insectivorous raptors such as lesser kestrel *Falco naumanni* may be very numerous around them. Walford (1964) mentions that locust swarms on the ground (presumably hoppers) were often indicated by large numbers of raptors circling over them. Also herons, terns, rollers and many others species are attracted to the swarms and may be found well away from their regular haunts at such times.

There is very little written about bird behaviour in Arabia around locust swarms but the report of Symens (1990) is extremely interesting, he notes several desert species breeding out of season and gull billed tern *Gelochelidon nilotica* and Caspian terns *Sterna caspia* feeding on them, far inland, probably having followed them from the coast.

If locusts do arrive in 2004/5 it is hoped to have a detailed report in *Phoenix* 22, so all observers are asked to report these events, the locations of locust swarms and any bird interactions, especially unusual or extralimital breeding.

**References:** • Symens, P. 1990. Effects of the mass migration of desert locusts *Schistocerca gregaria* on birds in the Taif Area, Saudi Arabia. *Sandgrouse* 12: 3-7. • Walford, G. F. 1964. *Arabian Locust Hunter*. The Adventurers Club, London.

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## Breeding Birds in Kuwait in 2004 by George Gregory

The year 2004 saw a continuation of efforts by the Bird Monitoring and Protection Team (BMAPT) of the Kuwait Environmental Protection Society (KEPS) to discover as much breeding evidence as possible in Kuwait before the publication of the Atlas of Breeding Birds of Arabia. In particular, strenuous efforts were made in May and June at all accessible sites, resulting in the addition of a number of species to the Kuwait list of breeding birds.

In addition to the data below many significant discoveries concerning breeding birds were made on Bubiyan and Warba Islands by some members of the team employed by the Kuwait Institute for Scientific Research (KISR). However, for contractual reasons these cannot be published until the publication of final reports by that body.

The following observers contributed to the data below: Sara al-Dosari, Abdalla al-Fadhel, Khalid al-Ghanim, Misha'l al-Jeriwi, Fahad al-Mansori, Matra al-Mutairy, Khalid al-Nasrallah, Hussain al-Qallaf, Shaikha Amthal al-Sabah, Musaad al-Saleh, AbdulRahman al-Sirhan, AbdulMuhsen al-Suraye'a, Andrew Bailey, Mark Chichester, Jamal Dashti, Brian Foster, George Gregory, Mahmoud Shihab and David Sherrill.

**Little bittern *Ixobrychus minutus*** Three pairs in summer at Sabah al-Salem (OA35), with recently-fledged juveniles, 8-14 June, another pair at Sewer Plant Reeds (OA34), had a recently-fledged juvenile, 14 June.

**Squacco heron *Ardeola ralloides*** An adult was seen carrying food into a reedbed at Sewer Plant Reeds, 8 June.

**Long-legged buzzard *Buteo rufinus*** An adult over Jahra Farms (NB35), 11 June, scarce breeding season record.

**Little crane *Porzana parva*** At least two pairs resident at Sabah al-Salem, with not-fully-grown juveniles there, 31 May (second Kuwait breeding record) and on 14 September.

**Spotted crane *Porzana porzana*** At least one pair resident at Sabah al-Salem. Although up to five pairs suspected of breeding annually at several sites in Kuwait there is still no confirmed evidence available.

**Coot *Fulica atra*** Two flightless juveniles at Sabah al-Salem from 14 May.

**Black-winged stilt *Himantopus himantopus*** Two full-winged juveniles at Sewer Plant Reeds on 1 June, but they must have hatched elsewhere.

**White-winged black tern *Chlidonias leucopterus*** Seven at Jahra East Outfall (NB35), including one newly-fledged juvenile, on the very early date of 21 May. Because of disturbance and reed-cutting, nesting was not attempted at the outfall and the juvenile is suspected of hatching at the nearby inaccessible South Doha Reserve (NB35).

**Wood pigeon *Columba palumbus*** One in possible nesting habitat, Jahra Farms, 13 May. In recent years has been regular in spring in possible breeding habitat at Rawdatain (NB36), though usually shot. Four together at Abdali Farms (NB36) 17 September could have been winter visitors.

**African collared dove *Streptopelia roseogrisea*** In addition to a scattering of records of presumed escaped birds, a pair was occasionally observed in the Sabah al-Ahmed Natural Reserve (NB36). A juvenile moulting to first winter plumage there on 26 August was potentially evidence of breeding but this bird could also have been an escape.

**Ring-necked parakeet *Psittacula krameri*** Adults seen visiting a nest at Abu Halifa (OA35) several times in May, also a not-fully-grown juvenile with two adults at Jahra Farms, 10 June. This species is resident in Kuwait, though present in much higher numbers in winter, but confirmed breeding seems not to have been reported before.

**Pallid swift *Apus pallidus*** Three nestlings were discovered in May in a building being demolished in Ahmadi (OA35).

**European roller *Coracias garrulus*** An adult in possible breeding habitat at Judailiyat (NB35) from 9-25 July at least and a newly-fledged juvenile Sulaibikhat Nature Reserve (NB35), 19 July. Breeding seems likely but there is some chance that breeding was not in this square.

**Black-crowned finch lark *Eremopterix nigriceps*** Family parties of adults with newly-fledged young seen at southern Abdali Farms, 14 May and at Sewer Plant Reeds, 8 June.

**Short-toed lark *Calandrella brachydactyla*** A female was photographed on a nest in Sabah al-Ahmed Natural Reserve during May.

**Swallow *Hirundo rustica*** A fully-fledged juvenile flying together with a pair of adults over Jahra Pool (NB35) on 11 June. The juvenile must almost certainly have hatched in Kuwait but the ABBA square is uncertain. Additionally, there was an adult male at Jahra Farms on the same day. The inaccessible area of Jahra Ponds seems a possible breeding site.

**Rufous bush chat *Cercotrichas galactotes*** In addition to known breeding areas, family parties of adults with newly-fledged young were seen at Sabriya Farm (NB36), 10 June and in tall reeds at Jahra Pool on 11 June. Now breeds widely in Kuwait.

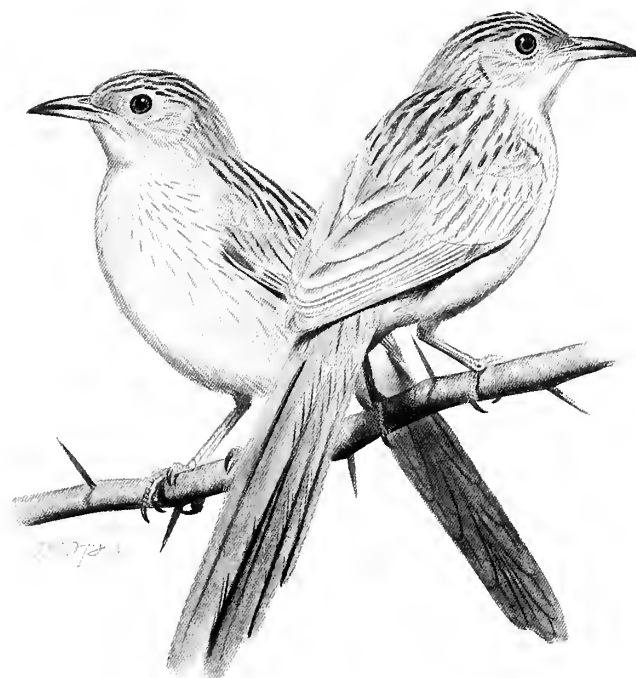
**Reed warbler *Acrocephalus scirpaceus*** Confirmed breeding at Sewer Plant Reeds, with four adults and six newly-fledged juveniles, 14 June.

**Clamorous reed warbler *Acrocephalus stentoreus*** Pairs observed and song for months from February at Jahra East Outfall, Sabah al-Salem and Sewer Plant Reeds.

**Great reed warbler *Acrocephalus arundinaceus*** Pairs observed and song heard for months from March at Jahra East Outfall and Sewer Plant Reeds.

**Olivaceous warbler *Hippolais pallida*** An additional breeding site at Sabriya Farm, with a newly-fledged juvenile there, 10 June.

**Booted (Sykes') warbler *Hippolais caligata(rama)*** Single Sykes' recorded in possible breeding habitat at Abdali Farms, 8 May and 3 June, and at Qaisat (NB36) on 8 May. Also, a bird seemingly intermediate between Sykes' and olivaceous, at Abdali Farms, 8 May.



**Common babbler *Turdoides caudatus*** One at al-Zour (OA34) 10-29 April could have been a reappearance of the previously long-staying bird. A group of at least four at Abdali Farms, 10 September, included one singing bird.

**Golden oriole *Oriolus oriolus*** A pair was recorded at Jahra Farms, 21 May and there were two not-fully-grown juveniles there, 6 June (1st Kuwait confirmed breeding record). An adult female and a juvenile were also seen there, 11 June. Six adults were at Sabriya Farm, 8 May, one pair remaining until at least 27 May and an adult female there until at least 10 June. An adult female on Green Island (OA35), 22 May. This species appears to be a secretive breeder and could well have bred undiscovered before in Kuwait.

**Spanish sparrow *Passer hispaniolensis*** A small colony built nests but abandoned them, at the Sabah al-Ahmed Natural Reserve in March. Up to four adults at Sabriya Farm from April and three newly fledged juveniles there, 10 June.

**Yellow-throated sparrow *Petronia xanthocollis*** At least one pair present from 16 April at Tulha in the Sabah al-Ahmed Natural Reserve and breeding confirmed by a not-fully-grown juvenile there several times in May. One in possible breeding habitat at Abdali Farms, 8 May.

**Red avadavat *Amandava amandava*** An adult male in possible breeding habitat in reeds at Sabah al-Salem, 13 June.

**Indian silverbill *Euodice malabarica*** At least one pair resident  
(Continued on page 27)

White-tailed plovers *Chettusia leucura* now nest regularly in the Dubai area adjacent to wetlands. This nest (March 2004) in a depression in the ground, decorated with a few stick fragments and flakes of dry earth is typical of nests in Arabia. See page 27. (Photo: Colin Richardson).



This nearly fledged pallid swift *Apus pallidus* was discovered during the demolition of a building in Kuwait. In addition to inland cliffs and caves the species regularly nests in buildings. A favourite nest site is the space beside air conditioning units. (Photo: Khalid Al-Nasrallah).



Black-crowned bush-shrike *Tchagra senegala* breeds in the south west highlands and the Mahra region which straddles the extreme east of Yemen and Dhofar hills of Oman. As for many, mainly Afrotropical, species which share this disjointed distribution, the breeding seasons vary slightly between the two populations. The race *percivali* is restricted to Arabia. (Photo Peter Castell)





at Sabah al-Salem, with two adults together with two newly-fledged young there, 11 June (1st Kuwait confirmed breeding record).

**Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis*** One in possible breeding habitat at Tulha in the Sabah al-Ahmed Natural Reserve, 20 May.

**Desert finch *Rhodospiza obsoleta*** An adult female and a juvenile male moulting to first-winter plumage in possible breeding habitat at Tulha in the Sabah al-Ahmed Natural Reserve, 20 May. The juvenile male must almost certainly have hatched in Kuwait, but the exact ABBA square is uncertain. Additionally, there was a juvenile male moulting to first-winter plumage in possible breeding habitat at Jahra Farms on 11 June.

**Trumpeter finch *Bucanetes githagineus*** One in possible breeding habitat at Tulha in the Sabah al-Ahmed Natural Reserve, 20 May. Singles at the same place 10 and 11 September could have been migrants.

George Gregory, GES, PO Box 33106, Rumaihiya, Kuwait. (Email: ggoldie51@hotmail.com).

## White-tailed plover - now an established resident in the UAE by Colin Richardson

A white-tailed plover *Chettusia leucura* nest containing two eggs was discovered near the Dubai Sewage Treatment Plant on 11 March 2004, making this the sixth consecutive year that the species has bred in the Emirates. The history of this species colonisation of the country is interesting and is due in the main to an increase in flooded salt flats and pools, a result of sewage waste water dumping and seepage.

I discovered the nest under the edge of a salt bush only 10 metres from waste-water, enhanced by leaking sewage, about 1 km from al Warsen lake (known locally as Wimpey Pits). The area was protected on all sides by scrub-covered sand dunes. The nest was a simple scrape, about 20 cm in diameter lined with small stones, sticks and mollusc shells. It contained two 30 mm long oval eggs, which were of a grey base colour with brown paint-splattered speckling. When photographing the nest on 14 & 15 March it contained four eggs (see photo page 26), so providing the approximate laying dates.

Until 1996 White-tailed plover was known as an uncommon passage migrant and winter visitor from late August to mid April, with peak passage in September to October (Richardson & Aspinall 1996), with generally less than 10 birds reported annually. Even on passage these birds were found almost exclusively on the shores of sewage water pools and around water treatment plants. A first sign of a change of status occurred in 1994 in Dubai, when up to two were favouring a man-made wetland at the Emirates golf course from 4-11 April and reported as 'possibly nest prospecting' (Richardson, 1997) although the birds subsequently disappeared. No breeding behaviour was noted in 1995, but in 1996 breeding took place in Ajman with

two fledged young appearing from an undiscovered nest site at a fish dump on 29 May. This was the first breeding record in the UAE (Richardson, 1999). There were no more breeding records of this opportunist species until 1999, when a network of sand quarry lakes now known as al Warsen lakes, containing surplus recycled water dumped by the nearby Dubai Sewage Treatment Plant, started appealing to the breeding instincts of this species.

This undisturbed habitat was obviously attractive to it, being at the time a selection of saturated salt scrub, shallow pools, *Phragmites* reed beds, surrounded by undulating dunes and gravel heaps, the latter acted as ideal look-out posts during nesting. Up to six birds were involved, although only one pair was proven to breed, producing active young in mid-April 1999. Elsewhere, throughout 1999 there were only nine other records of the species in the country, involving a total of 34 birds (Richardson, 2003). The species nested in the same general area during the spring of each year 2000-03. A sample of records shows that in 2001 a maximum of 16 birds, including six juveniles were at al Warsen lakes from 15 - 28 June, while in 2003 a maximum of 23 birds were found there on the 16 March, with many birds in a state of agitation, suggesting that nesting had begun. A peak number of 44 birds together was reported at al Warsen, 26 December 2002, the largest ever congregation to date. Groups of five birds or less continue to be reported away from the Dubai Sewage Treatment Plant at less than half a dozen sites, for example Sharjah dump, al Wathba sewage marsh Abu Dhabi, Qurrayah sewage pools Fujeira etc, all apparently ideal nesting habitat and I conclude that the species is not just migratory & dispersive but a highly opportunistic breeder.

In the UAE, birds have occurred in every month, specifically around their breeding sites, since 1999, and numbers increase slightly in summer, post-breeding, but more significantly in September and October when autumn migrants appear to supplement the numbers of resident birds.

**References:** • Richardson, C & S Aspinall. 1996. *A Checklist of the Birds of the United Arab Emirates*. Emirates Bird Records Committee, Dubai. • Richardson, C. 1999. First breeding of the White-tailed Plover in the UAE, *Phoenix* 16:23. • Richardson, C (ed). 1997. *Emirates Bird Report* No.19 Emirates Bird Records Committee, Dubai. • Richardson, C (ed.) 2003 *Emirates Bird Report* No.20. Emirates Bird Records Committee, Dubai.

Colin Richardson, P O Box 50394, Dubai UAE. (Email: Richar@cytanet.com.cy).

## Nest boxes and Bird Tables

There is still so much to learn about Arabian birds, particularly in respect of their breeding biology. Information on diet is also rather scant for many species. Observers who cannot get out to the hills as often as they would like, or need birds to watch when stuck at home, can make a real contribution to knowledge by putting up nest boxes and/or a bird table and watch what happens. There are a number of widespread birds in Arabia which will readily take to nest boxes put up in any back yard or undisturbed

corner of the desert. Nest boxes can be easily constructed of board or planks, just remember to have a simple hinged roof (a loose nail will do) for inspection and place them out of the sun, somewhere where they will not be disturbed and cannot be reached by predators. Some example of species that might be attracted almost anywhere (and the hole size needed on the box) are as follows; house and Spanish sparrows *Passer domesticus*, *P. hispaniolensis* (32 mm), common mynah *Acridotheres tristis*, (50 mm), ring-necked and alexandrine parakeets *Psittacula krameri*, *P. eupatria* (80 mm), little owl and scops owl (*Athene noctua* and *Scops* sp (70 mm) and hoopoe *Upupa epops* (85 mm). Of course several other restricted range species might take to the boxes locally. Also if there are plenty of exotic species around, especially parrots, they might be tempted by a conveniently placed box. Specialist boxes, properly sighted, will attract species like barn owls *Tyto alba*, kestrels *Falco tinnunculus* and pallid swifts *Apus pallidus* to breed. Information on nest boxes, including all the specialist boxes, and details of the dimensions, materials and sighting of boxes, plus breeding periods, will be provided on request to ABBA; Email: [arabian.birds@dial.pipex.com](mailto:arabian.birds@dial.pipex.com).

Bird tables placed out of reach of the local cat population and supplied with food scraps, such as bread, fruit and nuts will very quickly attract a range of urban birds, especially parakeets, mynahs and bulbul *Pycnonotus* sp.

If you put up nest boxes and or bird tables, please provide ABBA with information on which species use the boxes and the results of breeding attempts and which species visit bird tables and what food they take.

## First breeding of Bay-backed Shrike in Arabia by Ian Harrison & Dave Sargeant

Bay-backed shrike *Lanius vittatus* is considered a breeding resident in southern Iran, Pakistan and India and is described by Porter *et al.* (1996) as a "vagrant to Qatar, UAE and Oman". Nine sightings have been made in the United Arab Emirates (Richardson 2003) and seventeen sightings in the Sultanate of Oman (Oman Bird Records Committee database). Twelve of these Oman sightings have been in April in the Musandam peninsula, the northernmost enclave of Oman. There is one record from Musandam in late March and two in April and May in the Muscat area. There are two autumn records from the Oman central desert - Dauka on 21 October and Ghaftain on 22 September - which may indicate possible post-breeding dispersal.

Two Bay-backed Shrikes were seen by the writers at ar Rawdah in Musandam on 22 April 2004. One of these birds was seen to be rather agitated and was eventually seen to settle on a nest. This was situated about 6 m above the ground in a fork of three branches of one of the *Ziziphus spina-cristi* trees that are characteristic of the area and was constructed of dried grass and fine twigs. Unfortunately the precise contents of the nest could not be seen due to its height above the ground and the depth of the cup, although the female was photographed sitting. The bird was presumed to be sitting on eggs since although the male

brought food, this was given to the sitting female and not to any young bird.

Two birds were also seen on 10 April 2003. One of these birds was singing from the top of one of the many large *Ziziphus spina-cristi* trees. In retrospect this could indicate that breeding may well have taken place in 2003 as well as in 2004. (On a subsequent visit to the area - 3 July 2003 - no birds remained.)

This is the first record of Bay-backed Shrike *Lanius vittatus* breeding in Arabia.

**References:** • Oman Bird Records Committee Database.  
• Porter, R F, S Christiansen and P Schiermacker-Hansen. 1996. *Field Guide to the Birds of the Middle East*. T and D Poyser, London. • Richardson, C (ed.). 2003. *Emirates Bird Report* No.20. Emirates Bird Records Committee, Dubai, UAE.

Ian Harrison, CFBT, PO Box 2278. Ruwi 112, Sultanate of Oman (Email: [ianmair@omantel.net.om](mailto:ianmair@omantel.net.om)) and Dave E Sargeant, PDO (TCI/1), PO Box 81, Muscat 113, Sultanate of Oman (Email: [akalat@omantel.net.om](mailto:akalat@omantel.net.om)).



Mainly resident in Arabia but a part of the population of Bruce's green pigeon *Treron waalia* is thought to winter in Africa.

**Credits:** Photos are credited on the page they appear. Artwork in this issue is by David Showler (pages 4, 6, 10, 12, 13, 19, 22 & 28) and Jan Wilczur pages 1, 9 & 25. The maps (pages 17 & 21) are by M C Jennings. Carol Qirreh gave much help with preparation of this issue. Printed by Printroom and Lake Shore Graphics, 12 Northern Court, Vernon Road, Nottingham, NG6 0BJ, UK.

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